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# **WORK-BASED LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS**

**Johannes Caspar Landolt**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol  
in accordance with the requirements for award of  
the degree of Doctor of Education in the  
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## Abstract

This study focuses on informal collaborative learning, including communities of practice as knowledge creation and sharing tools for work-based learning, essential for the competitiveness of organisations in today's dynamic environment. Three research questions are explored in the context of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): how can informal collaborative learning be conceptualised in international humanitarian organisations; how do ICRC managers perceive the role of, and opportunities for, informal collaborative learning; how can informal collaborative learning be furthered?

The first question is addressed through a literature review. Even in the age of rising artificial intelligence, communities of practice appear to be a powerful knowledge management and creation tool. International humanitarian organisations, operating in diverse and dynamically changing contexts, have all the characteristics to adopt expansive approaches to learning and work. In practice, it seems most organisations have not yet reached that stage.

The second question is addressed through a cross-sectional mixed-methods study (focus group discussion (n=7), survey questionnaire (n=84) and in-depth interviews (n=6)). ICRC managers recognise and value opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the organisation. However, informal learning groups appear poorly defined with limited membership, while strong organisational structures seem somewhat restrictive and supportive of vertical hierarchies. Less than half the participants in the study simultaneously feel part of a learning community of managers and of an organisation-wide learning community, with differences apparent between expatriates and locally-hired staff, pointing to unmet needs in the area of informal collaborative practices.

The third question is addressed through aligning the above findings with the literature review. Communities of practice benefit from more expansive organisational structures, and need to be recognised and "cultivated". Using the affordances of modern technology, they should be based on inclusiveness and diversity, reaching beyond organisational boundaries, leading to innovation and adaptability in today's dynamically changing environment.

(299 words)

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## Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

# Table of contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Author's declaration .....	iii
Table of contents .....	iv
List of tables .....	vi
List of figures.....	vii
List of appendices .....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1. Statement of the problem .....	1
1.2. Workplace learning .....	3
1.2.1. Formal and informal learning .....	3
1.2.2. Work-based learning.....	9
1.3. Research gaps and research questions.....	14
1.4. Information and communications technology and workplace learning.....	15
1.5. The humanitarian context and the ICRC.....	19
1.5.1. Specificities of the humanitarian context in relation to learning in the workplace .....	19
1.5.2. The context of the ICRC and staff learning .....	26
1.6. Personal statement.....	30
1.7. Thesis outline .....	31
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	33
2.1. Cultural-Historical Psychology .....	33
2.2. Activity Theory .....	37
2.3. Adult learning theory and experiential learning.....	43
2.3.1. The concept of inquiry .....	43
2.3.2. Adult learning and experiential learning theory.....	45
2.4. Conceptual framework .....	48
2.4.1. Communities of practice .....	50
2.4.2. Communities of practice in international humanitarian organisations: systematic literature review.....	66
2.5. Conclusion and answer to research question 1 .....	83
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	86
3.1. Study design .....	86
3.2. Study population and sampling .....	88
3.3. Ethical considerations .....	89

3.4. Study procedures .....	91
3.4.1. Focus group discussion .....	92
3.4.2. Survey questionnaire .....	100
3.4.3. In-depth interviews.....	104
3.5. Reliability, validity and limitations of the study.....	106
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion .....	109
4.1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants.....	109
4.2. Staff member learning .....	115
4.3. Informal collaborative learning.....	119
4.4. Learning communities.....	131
4.5. Conclusion and answer to research question 2 .....	132
4.6. Recommendations and answer to research question 3 .....	134
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion.....	140
5.1. Summary of the main findings .....	140
5.2. Contribution to the literature and practice .....	142
5.3. Future perspectives and how the study has shaped my own work in the organisation .....	144
References .....	147
Appendices.....	165

## List of tables

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interviewees.....	105
Table 2. Demographic characteristics, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test.....	111
Table 3. Relation between educational level and contractual status.....	112
Table 4. Relation between age and contractual status. ....	113
Table 5. Staff member learning, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test. ....	118
Table 6: Informal collaborative learning, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test.....	124
Table 7. Learning community of managers and organisation-wide learning community.....	132



## List of figures

Figure 1. Re-conceptualised Informal and Incidental Learning model of Cseh, Watkins and Marsick, 1999 (Marsick et al., 2006, p.795). .....	4
Figure 2. SECI Model of Knowledge Creation (Nonaka and Konno, 1998, p.43). .....	6
Figure 3. Integrative Nature of Workplace Learning (Wang, 2018, p.15).....	8
Figure 4. Reference Model of Work-based Learning (Margaryan, 2008, p.42).....	11
Figure 5. Comprehensive Model of Work-Based Learning (Raelin, 1997, p.573).....	12
Figure 6. Evolution of Activity Theory.....	39
Figure 7. The activity hierarchy of Leontiev, 1981 (Crawford and Hasan, 2006, p.51).....	40
Figure 8. Cycle of expansive learning (Engeström, 2001, p.152). .....	42
Figure 9. Conceptual framework. International Humanitarian Organisations becoming Learning Organisations through Communities of Practice as Knowledge Management Tool. ....	49
Figure 10. Provisional Model of a School Operating as an Effective Professional Learning Community (Bolam et al., 2005, p.152).....	61
Figure 11. Flowchart of study procedures. ....	92
Figure 12. Recommendations for fostering communities of practice in the ICRC.....	135

## List of appendices

Appendix 1. Focus group discussion informed consent form.....	165
Appendix 2. Survey questionnaire .....	168
Appendix 3. Interview schedule.....	183
Appendix 4. Survey results.....	184
Appendix 5. Interview data matrix .....	189

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The chapter starts with a statement of the problem and an elaboration on the scientific rationale for the study. It continues with an introduction of the concepts and constructs of workplace and work-based learning, with a special focus on modern technologies and artificial intelligence and their impact on learning in organisations. This is followed by a discussion on research gaps and the research questions of the study. Further, specificities in the humanitarian sector in relation to learning in the workplace are outlined. The chapter is completed with a characterisation of the context of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the organisation in which the study for this thesis was conducted, and current learning opportunities for its staff members are addressed.

## 1.1. Statement of the problem

*How do organisations survive in today's volatile and dynamically changing contexts around the world? How do they keep up to date, compete and develop?*

Such questions are becoming more and more topical in humanitarian organisations. The need for professionalisation of the sector has become increasingly critical in an era marked by heightened competition for resources and visibility, the demand for accountability and the search for efficiency and effectiveness (Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley, 2009; Edwards, 1997; Heyse, 2003; Hume, C. and Hume, M., 2008; Mays, Racadio and Gugerty, 2012; Nunnenkamp and Öhler, 2012; Stirrat, 2006; Tan and von Schreeb, 2015; Verkoren, 2010; Walker and Russ, 2011). At the same time, modern humanitarian action is also characterised by mounting risks and an increasing frequency of security incidents (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2013; Stoddard et al., 2017). Organisational failure to learn, develop, and adapt, carries the risk of reduced funding, of exposure to avoidable risk, and of losing relevance. Simply put, it carries the risk of not surviving in today's dynamic contexts.

Margaryan (2008) defines three major changes in the nature of corporate work, which could broadly also be applied to humanitarian organisations, and which affect learning in the workplace today. First, the author highlights increased global competition; second, organisational structures are changing from hierarchical structures to flatter, task- and team-based models; and third, the rapid development of information and communications technology (ICT) requires additional new skills and a reorganisation of work through electronic means. Increasingly, ICT is also used as a tool for enhancing learning in organisations. To respond to these challenges, organisations will require lifelong learning from their employees, largely mediated through technology (Margaryan, 2008; Za, Spagnoletti and North-Samardzic, 2014). “To succeed now, we have to continually refresh our stocks of knowledge by participating in relevant ‘flows’ of knowledge – interactions that create knowledge or transfer it across individuals” (Hagel, Brown and Davison, 2010, p. 11). Finkelstein (2016) further argues that employees, and in particular younger workers, are, in addition, more interested in personal and customised coaching, creative freedom, collaborative learning opportunities, and ultimately, the chance to do meaningful work. The more an organisation does to enhance the intensity of the learning and growth experience for its employees, the more they will want to stay with the organisation and thus contribute to its development.

For now, in spite of rapid advances in ICT and the development of artificial intelligence, an essential resource of most businesses or organisations, in any sector, is composed of its staff (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014). This study will argue that this is especially relevant for the humanitarian sector (McHargue, 2003; Birdi, Patterson and Wood, 2007). Humanitarian organisations, as well as academic research, have increasingly been focusing on learning in the workplace.

This thesis will explore ways for fostering informal learning in international humanitarian organisations in times of rapid advances in technology and artificial intelligence. More specifically, it will study communities of practice and other related forms of informal collaborative learning as a knowledge creation tool for work-based learning, with the purpose of fostering individual and organisational learning and development. The thesis aims to study how communities of practice and

other forms of informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations are conceptualised in the literature and how such informal collaborative forms of learning are perceived among ICRC employees.

## 1.2. Workplace learning

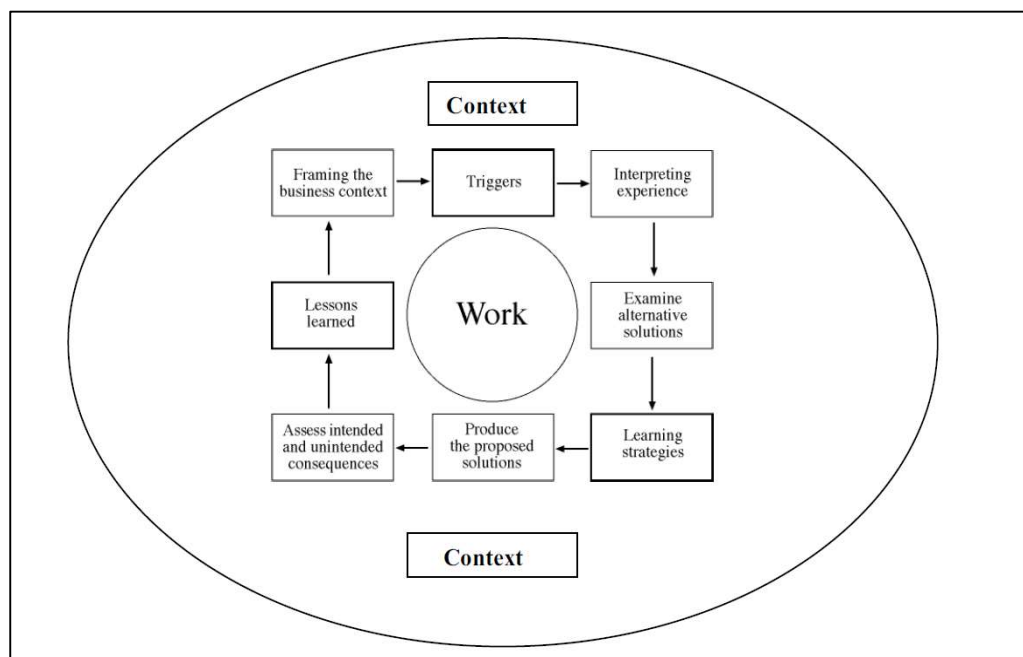
Workplace learning is broadly defined by the formal and informal nature of learning that occurs in the workplace (Cacciattolo, 2015; Manuti et al., 2015). Evans et al. (2006) discuss workplace learning in terms of learning in, for, and through work. There are many different approaches to workplace learning, in part because of different disciplinary backgrounds, different theoretical perspectives, and other factors. (Cacciattolo, 2015; Manuti et al., 2015).

### *1.2.1. Formal and informal learning*

Marsick and Watkins (1990) defined formal learning as classroom-based structured learning sponsored by an institution. By contrast, informal learning in the workplace is not classroom-based and less structured, and the control of learning is in the hands of the learner (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Informal learning also includes incidental learning, which happens as “byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning” (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p. 12). Marsick and Watkins were more interested in “how” people learn informally. The authors discussed that learning choices often come from interactions with others in the middle of a work activity. Later, the authors added that informal learning can take place under routine or non-routine conditions, comes from specific workers’ needs and that reflection is used to gain further insight on a situation (Marsick and Watkins, 1997; Marsick and Watkins, 2001). The authors developed (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), and later adapted with Cseh, a model of informal learning (Figure 1), which “grows out of the workplace context, is triggered by something in that context, proceeds through identifying and trying solutions, and is enhanced by critical reflection throughout the process” (Marsick et al., 2006, p.794).

The context is acknowledged as playing an important role for informal learning (Cseh, 1998). Cseh (1998) demonstrated this connection in a study among managers of small private companies in Romania, at a time of critical political changes in the country. In addition, Cseh's study (1998) found that learning from others and from experience were major ways of learning in such dynamically changing times.

Figure 1. Re-conceptualised Informal and Incidental Learning model of Cseh, Watkins and Marsick, 1999 (Marsick et al., 2006, p.795).



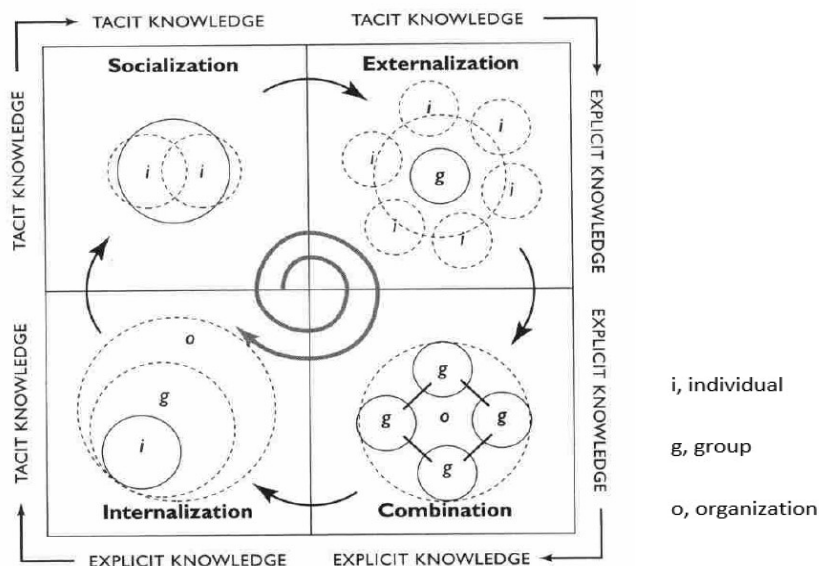
Many authors highlight the importance of informal learning for learning in organisations (Marsick et al., 2006; Wang, 2018; Za, Spagnoletti and North-Samardzic, 2014). Some authors, for instance Marsick et al. (2006), refer to the '70:20:10 rule', which states that 10 percent of a worker's knowledge are derived from training events, 20 percent are acquired through interaction with others, such as social learning, coaching, mentoring, and collaborative learning, and 70 percent stem from tackling challenging assignments at work, or learning by doing (Kajevski and Madsen, 2012). This "rule" is based on the study of McCall, Eichinger and Lombardo among 200 executives, while at the Centre for Creative Leadership (Kajevski and Madsen, 2012). Marsick et al. (2006) refer to several other small studies in support of the "rule" - Zemke (1985, cited by Marsick et al., 2006, p.798); Bruce, Aring, and

Brand (1998, cited by Marsick et al., 2006, p.798); Verespej (1998, cited by Marsick et al., 2006, p.798); Mumford (1993, cited by Marsick et al., 2006, p.798); Burgoyne and Hodgson (1993, cited by Marsick et al., 2006, p.798), among others. In a newer report on international volunteers from Australia, 97% of learning happened informally, and only 3% came from structured professional development initiatives (Fee and Gray, 2011). Similar data was reported by Holtham and Rich (2012). Nevertheless, DeRue and Myers (2015) argue that the empirical evidence to support the rule is limited. Some organisations accept the “70:20:10 rule”, though with a different ratio, such as 40:30:30 or 50:30:20, respectively (Kajewski and Madsen, 2012). No matter whether academics and organisations accept or not the “rule”, informal learning seems to be crucial for work and learning in organisations: “Organizations today are seeking new ways to understand and deliver learning outside the classroom. The reasons for this trend are many, but it is in large part fuelled by radical changes in the global market-place that have pushed many organizations to work, organize, think and learn in very different ways” (Watkins and Marsick, 1992, p.287). Moreover, it could be argued that the speed of change today can rapidly render formal learning solutions obsolete, whereas informal learning, whether human or technology-driven, can adapt and update more quickly.

Formal learning has been associated with more theoretical knowledge, the knowledge of “what” and “why” something is happening (Brown and Duguid, 1998). It is referred to as explicit knowledge, which is formalised and codified, and is relatively easy to be stored and transmitted (Raelin, 2008). Informal learning, on the other hand, arises from doing the work and social interaction with peers and experts in the workplace, and is associated with practical knowledge (Margaryan, 2008). Practical knowledge is referred to as tacit knowledge. This type of knowledge was originally defined by Polanyi (1966). It is the knowledge of “how” something is happening (Brown and Duguid, 1998). It is hard to communicate and deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Similarly, Anderson (1983) differentiates between declarative (explicit) knowledge, representing the conceptual understanding of phenomena, and procedural (tacit) knowledge, representing the skill of doing something.

Even though tacit knowledge may be difficult to be expressed and codified, it may be teachable (Raelin, 2008). Human beings create knowledge by actively creating and organising their experiences (Guldberg et al, 2013). Tacit and explicit knowledge do not exist as separate entities. They are in a dynamic process and expand through social interaction in a cycle of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (SECI) (Nonaka, 1994). Socialisation refers to the sharing and creation of tacit knowledge through direct experience; externalisation is the articulation of tacit knowledge through dialogue and reflection; combination consists in systematising and applying explicit knowledge and information; and internalisation refers to learning and acquiring new tacit knowledge in practice. The transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge reflects the process of knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994). This is supported through spirals of continuous interaction at the individual, team and organisational levels (Nonaka and Konno, 1998).

Figure 2. SECI Model of Knowledge Creation (Nonaka and Konno, 1998, p.43).



Nonaka (1994) supports the “middle-up-down” management model, where middle managers play an essential role in this process, by providing the overall direction in which the organisation should go. Some authors see this as a unidirectional nature of knowledge creation and argue that it can lead to a restriction of knowledge creation (Engeström, 2001; Hasan, 2004). By contrast, in horizontal or expansive learning, the process develops in a similar way, but the participants in the

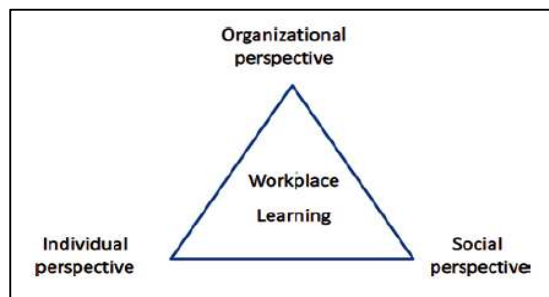


process determine the direction themselves (Engeström, 2001). In order for an organisation, including a humanitarian one, to be able to evolve in today's dynamic environment, the organisation should be knowledge creating (Guldborg et al., 2013; Hume, C. and Hume, M., 2008). Davenport and Prusak (1998) refer to the process of capturing, creating and sharing knowledge as knowledge management. As opposed to information management, which largely revolves around data processing, "knowledge management is more intangible and less codified: the focus is on learning, intelligence, innovation" (Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley, 2009, p.58). Guldborg et al. (2013, p.113) suggest in relation to non-governmental not-for-profit organisations that knowledge management is "a way of understanding what best practice means and how it is used in individual cases across the organisation". This process, according to Guldborg et al. (2013), requires an active approach to learning and development from the employees as well as interpersonal trust within teams (Politis, 2003). Depending on the maturity of an organisation, including its ability to integrate innovation, new tools and practices, Hume and Hume (2008, p.138) suggest that a customised approach to knowledge management is required, as "one size does not fit all". In addition, knowledge management today is closely linked with artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence allows machines to process big data, and deliver it to humans, so that humans can make better decisions. Both knowledge management and artificial intelligence are about knowledge. Blending artificial intelligence with knowledge management will allow for newer ways of knowledge creation (Bates, 2017; Rhem, 2017).

Based on the literature, Wang (2018) summarises that learning in organisations has to be looked at from three perspectives – individual, social and organisational (Figure 3). The individual perspective is mainly characterised by self-directed lifelong learning (Wang, 2018). Organisational learning addresses the transformation of the knowledge of individuals in the organisation into organisational knowledge (Verkoren, 2010). Organisational learning is distinguished from individual learning by an additional step of collective knowledge creation (Louis, 1994). This step involves knowledge sharing among staff members and the capture of innovation (Verkoren, 2010). Senge (1990, p.3), writing about learning organisations, speaks of organisations "where people continually

expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” Verkoren (2010) lists a number of means through which organisational learning can be achieved, such as learning communities, reflection days, documentation of members’ knowledge, and after-action reviews. Operational changes, made following knowledge acquisition and sharing, are indicators of organisational learning (Verkoren, 2010). There is also a fourth, inter-organisational (Engeström, 2001), perspective of learning based on collaboration between organisations, learning and joint understanding, which is becoming essential in today’s dynamic and interconnected environment.

*Figure 3. Integrative Nature of Workplace Learning (Wang, 2018, p.15).*



Some authors go further by arguing that communities of practice, supported by modern ICT, are at the centre of knowledge management in an organisation (Guldborg et al., 2013; Hasan, 2004). Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015, p.1) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly [...] Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour”. The overall focus of this thesis is on exploring ways for fostering informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations with the purpose of fostering individual and organisational learning and development. The concept of communities of practice will be comprehensively conceptualised in Chapter 2.

Initially, Marsick and Watkins looked at formal and informal learning as opposites (1990); later on, as a continuum, corroborating Billet's (2004) and Eraut's (2004a) views. This continuum can be seen as reflected in the transfer of knowledge between education and workplace settings (Eraut, 2004b). Eraut (2004b, p.212) argues that "transferring a particular concept or idea from an education setting to a workplace setting is particularly difficult, because of the considerable differences in context, culture and modes of learning", involving different knowledge types.

In recent years, Marsick and Watkins' concepts about the relationship between formal and informal knowledge evolved further. The authors define formal and informal learning as dialectical unity – one brings the other into existence and completes it in the context of real life situations that require adjustment, problem solving, and learning. Informal learning thus "informs and transforms formal capacities" and "formal learning is restructured as it is transformed into actionable knowledge in the context of concrete situations" (Marsick et al., 2017, p.29). Margaryan (2008) concludes that organisational learning needs may be best met by an integration of formal and informal learning within a technology-enhanced work-based learning pedagogy, thus maximising their advantages, and minimising disadvantages. Comparably, Raelin says that work-based learning must blend theory and practice (Raelin 2008). "Theory makes sense only through practice, and practice makes sense only through reflection enhanced by theory" (Raelin, 2008, p.67).

### *1.2.2. Work-based learning*

In spite of including forms of formal learning, workplace learning normally does not benefit from formal educational recognition (Avis, 2010; Boud and Symes, 2000). The distinct concept of work-based learning emerged in response, with formal higher education accreditation offered for study largely taking place in the workplace, and work itself being the focus of study (Boud and Symes, 2000). Work-based learning also developed beyond the exclusive realm of higher education accreditation, to include other types of learning in the workplace. The concept of work-based learning is not new. It has been around for centuries since apprenticeships in medieval guilds, and even before. People have

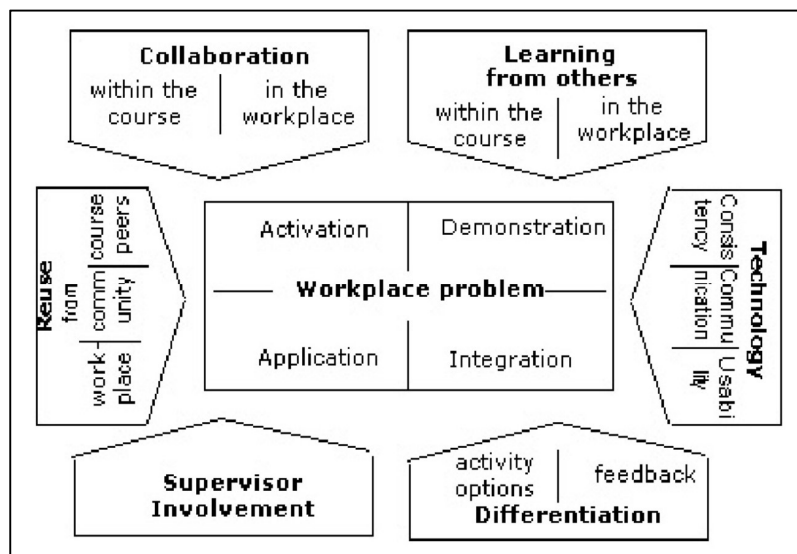
always been learning from people. As Raelin (2000, p.xi) asks: “Isn’t it high time that we return learning to a very natural location – to work itself? [...] Is this not a most natural, even intuitive process?” He continues: “This is where work-based learning comes in. Work-based learning expressly merges theory with practice, knowledge with experience. It recognizes that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom” (Raelin, 2000, p.2).

Different authors approach work-based learning from different perspectives. Margaryan (2008), for instance, presents a structured work-based learning model in her book “Work-based learning, a blend of pedagogy and technology”. Work-based learning is viewed as a collaborative and developmental process, tailored to the individual’s needs, and situated in the context of work-based activities. Learning for work requires a firm focus on outcomes, relevant to organisational project-based needs, “while creating and sharing knowledge through collaboration and team work” (Margaryan, 2008, p.12). Margaryan (2008) defines work-based learning as a pedagogical strategy integrating formal and informal learning, situated in the context of work. Work-based learning can address the complex challenges of today’s workplace, and, when enhanced by ICT, it can “facilitate integration of work and learning in unprecedented ways” (Margaryan, 2008, p.12). Margaryan enumerates nine characteristics and components of work-based learning according to her model: it is situated in the workplace, requires collaboration and teamwork, involves creating and sharing knowledge, integrates formal and informal learning, enables personalisation and contextualisation, facilitates the legitimization of procedural knowledge, involves learning by networking, is afforded by technology and makes use of a project-based format of the workplace (Margaryan, 2008).

The workplace is thus recognised as a legitimate location for learning. Conceptual knowledge of “know what” and “know why” alone is no longer sufficient, and the procedural knowledge of “know how” and “know where” is also required (Margaryan, 2008, p. 12). “Learning to master procedural knowledge, is characterized by performance-based learning outcomes; by pedagogy that is more situational, experiential and based on real workplace problems; and by content that is defined by work requirements rather than subject matter disciplines” (Margaryan, 2008, p. 12 ). In developing her

model, Margaryan built on the first five of Merrill’s principles of instruction for effective learning (Merrill,2002, cited by Margaryan, 2008, p.35), and drew up the following 11 principles in her reference model for work-based learning (Figure 4): 1) anchoring in business problem 2) activation of existing knowledge and skills 3) demonstration of new knowledge and skills 4) application of new knowledge and skills 5) integration of new knowledge and skills 6) learning from others, from within and beyond the course 7) supervisor’s/workplace expert’s involvement 8) reusing resources contributed by learners, sourced from the workplace and the broader organisational community 9) learning collaboratively with peers in the course and in the workplace 10) personalisation and contextualisation of work-based activities and feedback and assessment and accommodation of learners’ needs 11) usable and functional technologies to support learners (2008, p. 42).

Figure 4. Reference Model of Work-based Learning (Margaryan, 2008, p.42).

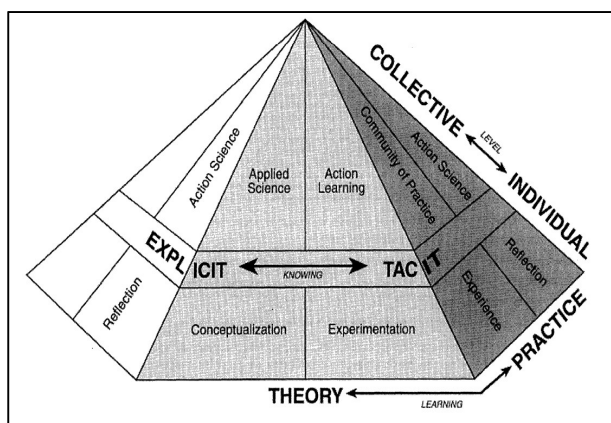


The model gives a structured overview of what practical work-based learning can look like – combining both formal and informal learning, at times within or outside of the framework of a course, blending pedagogy and technology.

Raelin’s model of work-based learning (1997) agrees with Margaryan’s model by ‘bridging knowledge and action in the workplace’. Employees, in order to be proficient, need to bridge the gap

between explicit and tacit knowledge and between theory and practice in a specific work-related context (Raelin, 1997). Conventional forms of training do not fully address learners' needs. Raelin mostly eschews classroom learning, which, he says, tends to segment formal and informal learning, and which often does not acknowledge the value of informal learning. Raelin's model of work-based learning expands on Nonaka's (1994) spiral of knowledge creation and interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. It is less structured, in comparison to Margaryan's (2008), and broader at the same time, in a philosophy of praxis (Raelin, 2008, p. 79). It is depicted three dimensionally, showing movement across all three dimensions.

*Figure 5. Comprehensive Model of Work-Based Learning (Raelin, 1997, p.573).*



For Raelin (2008), the three main elements of work-based learning comprise action and task-related learning, collective knowledge creation and use, and a learning-to-learn aptitude, including the questioning of underlying assumptions of practice. In order to help people learn collectively with others, a number of action strategies, including action learning, action science, and communities of practice are included in his work-based learning model. Raelin (2008) conceptualises work-based learning both individually, involving transformative learning through experience and reflection, and collectively, which is explicit through applied science and action science, and tacit through action learning and communities of practice. Conceptualisation allows the individual employee to challenge

assumptions in practice; in experimentation, the individual employee applies conceptual knowledge to a context. However, applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations at the individual level can confront accepted practice. Experience is required to reinforce tacit knowledge, acquired in experimentation, followed by reflection, so that tacit knowledge can be brought to the surface. At the collective level, Raelin relates knowledge to applied science, e.g. applying existing scientific knowledge to develop more practical applications. Like at the individual level, theories of applied science are helpful to practitioners, if incorporated into practice. This is at the core of action learning, where real workplace problems are the primary subject matter. Employees come together to form a community of practice, where, involved in action together, they create a shared understanding and solutions for workplace problems. Communities of practice return knowledge back into the context. Finally, action science is defined as a form of “reflection-in-action”. It brings individuals’ and groups’ models into “consciousness”, and tries to assess their contribution to an expected or unexpected workplace problem. Thus, theory and practice are merged.

Raelin’s (2008) work-based learning model is particularly useful for collaborative types of learning through the use of action learning and the development of communities of practice. While solutions to real work problems may emerge through action learning, or, on the contrary, groups may not readily find workable solutions, the real benefit of action learning lies in the method of collaborative reflection and feedback (Raelin, 2008).

In summary, lifelong learning has been recognised as essential to meet demands of today’s fast-paced workplace — globalisation, demographic changes, economic dynamics, industrial transformations, uncertainty, rapid change, diversity, technology and virtual work among others (Margaryan, 2008; Marsick et al., 2017; Wang, 2018). The workplace has been rediscovered as an important site of learning for solving real workplace problems. The link of formal and informal learning afforded by work-based learning shows that there does not need to be a dichotomisation of the two. Formal and informal learning complete each other (Marsick et al., 2017). Raelin (1997) promotes the combination of both types of learning in his work-based learning model, and Margaryan (2008), in her

model, further shows that the integration of formal and informal learning with modern technology maximises the learning process.

### 1.3. Research gaps and research questions

At the same time, the literature also underlines the difficulty of promoting informal learning (Beattie, 2006), not least because channelling or structuring informal learning can carry the risk of making it artificial or even destroying it (Marsick et al., 2006). Practical guidance on how to foster more informal and less structured learning in international humanitarian organisations, including in the ICRC, is limited (ICRC, 2008a). For instance, a decade ago in an internal document, the ICRC (2008a) provided an overview of possible informal learning mechanisms in the organisation, ranging from individual supervision through mentoring and coaching to peer learning through communities of practice and action learning. However, no data is available on the actual use of such mechanisms. The research on the more formal and structured aspects of learning in international humanitarian organisations reveals a growing field of study amid a search for professionalisation, standards and more accountability across the sector. Regarding more informal kinds of learning in international humanitarian organisations and their contribution to individual and organisational learning, however, there is as yet a gap in the literature.

It is this gap in the literature which provides the scientific rationale for this study. Through a review of the existing literature and empirical research conducted among staff of the ICRC, the study will explore how such more informal learning can be conceptualised in international humanitarian organisations, and will offer recommendations to the ICRC for fostering more informal types of learning, complementing more formal ones. Informal collaborative practices can be seen as a tool for work-based learning. Such informal types of learning are essential for advancing knowledge creation and knowledge management in an organisation, which, in turn, are essential for the survival and competitiveness of an organisation in today's dynamic environment. Formal and informal learning



should exist hand in hand. The latter is associated with tacit knowledge and the former with explicit. The objective is to generate tacit knowledge, which can happen through informal learning, tested in practice, turned into explicit knowledge and disseminated through formal learning. Thus, on a different level, work-based learning, as a pedagogical strategy integrating formal and informal learning, can be seen as a tool for knowledge management in an organisation, thus leading to a learning organisation (Garnett, Costley, and Workman, 2016; Seufert, 2000). The ICRC aspires to become a learning organisation (ICRC, 2012a).

To this end, the thesis will focus on the concept of communities of practice as a knowledge creation and sharing tool for work-based learning, on the path of an organisation becoming a learning organisation. Three research questions will be addressed in this study in order to achieve this aim:

1. How can informal collaborative learning, as a tool for work-based learning in international humanitarian organisations, be conceptualised?
2. How do ICRC managers perceive the significance of and opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the ICRC?
3. How can informal collaborative learning be improved and furthered better in a practical way in the ICRC?

Further, the thesis will refer to the role of ICT, without whose affordances – both informal and formal – learning at work would be impossible today.

#### **1.4. Information and communications technology and workplace learning**

Modern ICT contributes in a major way to workplace learning, and has given rise to extensive changes in the way organisations work and communicate. The possibilities for learning offered by modern technologies are immense and continue to develop rapidly. The term “information and communication technology” refers to any technology or product used for processing and

communicating information. It includes a variety of technologies such as computer and network hardware and software, radio, television, video, DVD, telephone, and satellite systems. Organisations are using ICT in almost every aspect of their operations. Some applications of ICT to workplace learning include, but are not limited to, information access, web-based training, peer collaboration, online performance support, and knowledge management (Wang, 2018). The application of ICT to learning is often referred to as e-learning. The combination of more traditional, usually face-to-face learning methods with ICT is referred to as blended learning and is widely practiced in many organisations (Margaryan, 2008; Wang, 2018). E-learning components of such blended learning programmes can also be used to capture tacit learning and for building networks among course participants (Wang, 2018). Blended learning programmes could contribute to linking formal and informal learning into practice.

Wang (2018) summarises the benefits of e-learning, including 1) access, convenience and flexibility of learning without time and space constraints; 2) delivery efficiency; 3) self-directed learning; 4) peer interaction; 5) knowledge management; and 6) cost-effectiveness in comparison to classroom courses.

On the other hand, Wang (2018) outlines a number of barriers to consider when integrating e-learning with learning in organisations: 1) content relevance to individuals; 2) alignment with organisational goals; environment and culture 3) instructional design; 4) assessment - comprehensive evaluation and accountability is seen as the most often ignored part of e-training and development; and 5) costs management - e-learning, though saving on classroom activities, can require considerable ICT investment. Wang (2018) reiterates that e-learning requires appropriate managerial as well as pedagogical support, in addition to technological support, in order to be successful.

E-learning in the workplace can go further and can be facilitated through learning content management systems (LCMS). LCMS can be used to create, publish, modify, organise, and maintain information and content through central platforms. Such applications support the collaborative

creation and management of information and content, mostly through web portals or web-based applications (Wang, 2018). In addition, open educational resources or open learning content give access to a worldwide community, and help equalise access to knowledge and educational opportunities (Benlamri, Klett, & Wang, 2016; Bonk et al., 2015). Massive open online courses (MOOCs), for example, have created new opportunities for employees to access open online courses with high flexibility and wide choices, complementing peer learning and collaboration (Margaryan, Bianco and Littlejohn, 2015; Wang, 2018).

Social media and related social interaction are further examples of ICT applications to workplace learning, closely linked to informal collaborative learning. Web 2.0 is the term used to describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that enables people to share information and collaborate online. The main technologies and services of Web 2.0 include online forums and blogs; wikis, enabling communities to write documents on the web collaboratively; social networking; video sharing; social bookmarking; tag clouds; rich site summaries (RSSs), allowing to access updates to online content; podcasts, video and audio conferencing, and others. Social media help in rapidly improving information sharing within and between teams while reducing document production and e-mail communication (Wang, 2018).

Social media are also actively being used for the creation and development of online professional learning communities, as is for instance the case of the Arkansas professors of educational administration, who use social networks to communicate within their professional learning community (Albritton et al., 2016). ICT supports in a unique way informal learning in the workplace, especially by assisting more unstructured, self-directed approaches to the creation and transfer of knowledge among employees, and by promoting a collaborative environment and new forms of learning communities (Wang, 2018). Some authors, however, draw attention to the potential of social media for creating distractions (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Mobile and ubiquitous learning is a further application of ICT. It is related to the mobility of the learner and enables learning anyplace and anytime, thus linking to situated learning theory, stating that true learning takes place under real-life circumstances (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wang, 2018). Cloud computing, allowing for flexibility and mobility in accessing and sharing knowledge, has often been used as an environment for ubiquitous learning (Wang, 2018).

Another application of ICT to learning are computer simulations and immersive virtual realities. This allows for realistic situations that may not occur frequently or would be too expensive or too dangerous to be “experienced” in real life, and which can be learned from virtually. This gives employees the opportunity to practice skills and interact with others (Wang, 2018). Verbal texts, diagrams and visual representations support the understanding and transmission of complex ideas. The sheer amount of information available and the numerous learning opportunities afforded by ICT could easily become overwhelming, and artificial intelligence applications have been developed to help individual learners with “humanlike adaptive assistance” (Wang, 2018, p.34).

Current technologically-enhanced professional learning provides new opportunities for learning at work (Littlejohn and Margaryan, 2014). At the same time, the full extent of new challenges presented by automation, robotics and the possibilities of artificial intelligence in today’s “Fourth Industrial Revolution”, involving physical, digital and biological interaction (Schwab, 2017), is not yet clear. The risk of information overload was already mentioned. In addition, allowing new types of interaction, such as those made possible by the use of social media, might challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of organisations and such new platforms might prove uncomfortable for powerful people within a company (Wang, 2018). Guldberg et al. (2013), for instance, present the case of Scottish Autism, an organisation in which the effects of the vertical top-down structure were mitigated by introducing organisational elements such as a knowledge management forum. Alternatively, open communication via social media may also be challenging for employees who expect to be directed instead of being empowered. The full extent of the impact of social media on learning is not yet clear. Littlejohn and Margaryan (2014), for instance, highlight a number of

challenges inherent in technologically enhanced professional learning, such as the growing trend, afforded by technology, of work practices transcending organisational boundaries. This new reality calls for a broader analytical perspective than that made possible by using the organisation as unit of analysis. The authors also argue that there is a certain unpredictability of outcomes in relation to the integration of social media into learning in the workplace. New solutions should not simply “recreat[e] familiar patterns of formal learning in the digital realm”, but should rather focus on “the development of toolsets [...] that professionals can use to support their own learning in the context of their day-to-day problem-solving and work” (Margaryan and Littlejohn, 2014, p. 175).

In summary, ICT is having a profound impact on the way people learn. Whatever the specifics of the chosen solution, current research into technology-enhanced professional learning highlights the value of the informal nature of work-based learning and the increasing importance of user-generated knowledge (Siadat, Jovanovic and Gasevic, 2014). Self-directed learning is more prevalent than ever (Wang, 2018). Individually generated knowledge should be further used for collaborative learning. The opportunities and challenges for collaborative e-learning, knowledge creation and knowledge management in international humanitarian organisations will be discussed in Chapter 2.

## 1.5. The humanitarian context and the ICRC

### *1.5.1. Specificities of the humanitarian context in relation to learning in the workplace*

As discussed above, the context, in which organisations perform, plays an important role for learning (Cseh, 1998; Margaryan, 2008; Raelin, 1997). In this section, the specificities of humanitarian organisations in relation to learning in the workplace will be discussed. Humanitarian organisations are not-for-profit organisations. Humanitarian organisations can be national or international, employees may be volunteers, or not. Not-for-profit organisations are not limited to humanitarian organisations only. They may include other entities such as local government bodies, publicly funded schools and universities, health services and other charitable institutions (Birdi, Patterson and Wood,

2007). Humanitarian action often also involves private sector contractors and government agencies, including increasingly parts of the armed forces (Sezgin and Dijkzeul, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the context of international humanitarian organisations is understood as relating to not-for-profit non-military humanitarian action. Compared to learning in the for-profit sector, where most research on learning at work has been conducted, learning in the not-for-profit sector is still under-researched (Beattie, 2006; Benevene and Cortini, 2010; Birdi, Patterson and Wood, 2007). Nevertheless, workplace learning in the not-for-profit sector, and in particular in the humanitarian sector, has its own defining characteristics, which may not simply warrant a transfer of conclusions from research conducted in other contexts.

First, as noted, humanitarian organisations are not-for-profit organisations. While the profit motive may lead to a search for strict cost effectiveness in the private sector, other considerations, or different measures of effectiveness used in the not-for-profit sector, may require or favour somewhat different approaches to learning. Funding may be an important ancillary goal of humanitarian organisations; however, their primary goal is different from that of organisations with a profit motive. According to Beattie (2006), managers in the voluntary sector may have more time to engage in developmental humanism, a time-intensive learning attitude which fosters trust and team cohesion. Managers in the private sector, on the other hand, may feel stronger pressure to achieve quick results (Beattie, 2006). Similarly, Birdi, Patterson and Wood (2007) in a study comparing learning practices in 368 UK for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, found that the performance of not-for-profit organisations may be more closely linked to the knowledge and skills of individual employees, because of the functional nature of their work, dependent on individual human qualities. On the other hand, for-profit organisations might rely more on technology to achieve organisational objectives (Birdi, Patterson and Wood, 2007). Further, the study found that both management and non-management not-for-profit employees took part in the various workplace learning practices. Team learning practices were equally represented in for-profit and not-for-profit organisations. The author concluded that investment in human employee development may potentially have a bigger impact in

not-for-profit organisations than in the private sector (Birdi, Patterson and Wood, 2007). At the same time, Hume and Hume (2015) argue that humanitarian organisations, having to operate in increasingly competitive markets, are impelled “to adopt more commercial business models and practices in order to improve their strategic performance, particularly competitive positioning for donor appeal and corporate positioning, staff retention, overall operational strategy, and service strategy and delivery” (Hume and Hume, 2015, p.25).

Second, in addition to specificities of the humanitarian context in general, international humanitarian organisations work in very diverse specific contexts. Today’s business scholars use the concept of the VUCA world – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous - to show how staff need to be able to adapt to changing realities (Livingston, 2014). Such complexity has long been the hallmark of the humanitarian world. Studies have shown that the required leadership qualities, while essentially the same as in other sectors, need to be in evidence even more, given the complexity of the humanitarian working environment (ALNAP, 2011). In a review of learning in international non-governmental organisations, Edwards (1997) highlighted the unstable, uncertain, contingent and diverse nature of contexts in which international non-governmental organisations work. As a result, these organisations cannot assume that a course of action, which was successful in one context, would produce the same results in another (Edwards, 1997). Edwards (1997) goes on to say that in such an environment, know-how based on reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) becomes more important than know-what. Learning from mistakes is essential. The values and beliefs many workers for international non-governmental organisations harbour may prove an impediment to learning, Edwards (1997) finally says, as lessons learned can present them with ethical and moral dilemmas. In this relation, studies suggest that international humanitarian organisations can enhance the development of valuable global skills and capabilities (Fee and Gray, 2011). Fee and Gray (2011, p.538) refer to international volunteering as “the accidental skill factory”.

The highly dynamic context of humanitarian work is often related to high staff turnover, including in remote locations. Often, staff is hired to work on a project and cannot be retained after

the completion of the project (Bollettino and Bruderlein, 2008; Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999). Volunteers, as well as paid staff members, sometimes seem to come and go at random (McHargue, 2003), making knowledge retention in the organisation more difficult.

Third, often the context in which international humanitarian organisations work is linked to security issues, in a broad sense, covering both the safety and security of beneficiaries of humanitarian action, and that of its providers. The security of beneficiaries is closely linked to the precept to “do no harm”, one of the basic ethical principles underlying humanitarian action ( Anderson, M., 1999; ICRC, 2004; ICRC, 2008b; Slim, 1997; Slim, 2015). Bad decisions in the humanitarian sector potentially can lead to life-threatening outcomes.

Provider security can equally be adversely affected by bad decisions. It is not possible to factor in all potential eventualities in any given situation, and the complete elimination of risk is normally not possible for humanitarian organisations (Brugger, 2009), many of which, by definition, are active in risky environments. Thus, learning how to behave in difficult situations, and learning from such situations, becomes essential. This behavioural aspect also includes inappropriate conduct such as the exploitation of vulnerable persons or the flaunting of relative wealth, which has spawned numerous humanitarian exposés (Polman, 2011; Smirl, 2015). Another tendency among some aid organisations is the ‘bunkerization’ of international aid workers in the face of risk (Duffield, 2012). ‘Bunkerization’ refers to retreating into offices in walled compounds, using armoured cars and sometimes even armed guards. However, this might have negative consequences by deepening the divide between beneficiaries and aid workers and reinforcing some misperceptions about humanitarians and “Western” values. Critics also highlight the mismanagement, misdirection and possible unintended negative effects of aid, with potentially disastrous consequences for security (Barnett, 2011; Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Duffield, 2007; Duffield, 2014; Weiss, 2012; Weiss, 2013). The days of unencumbered aid delivery and universal acceptance, if they ever existed, are over (Bergman, 2009). Many organisations are subject to growing numbers of security incidents (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2013; Stoddard et al., 2017), and the number of fatalities among aid workers has been increasing



relentlessly, with a record 155 aid workers killed, 171 seriously wounded and 134 kidnapped in 2013 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015). In contrast to the military, many humanitarian organisations generally do not resort to armed protection except in extreme cases, and rely on acceptance of their mandate and mission by parties to a conflict instead (Fast, 2014). Fast (2014) highlights both external threats and internal vulnerabilities, and recommends a thorough overhaul of security management for the aid sector in general. Given the often precarious nature of the environment, putting in place appropriate learning mechanisms in order to mitigate internal vulnerabilities such as inappropriate behaviour, may be one of the most effective ways of reducing risk attached to the operational environment.

Fourth, international humanitarian organisations are arguably among the organisations with the most culturally diverse workforces, which is recognised as one of their strongest values (Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999). The ICRC for example, following a policy of internationalisation over the last two decades, now boasts 142 nationalities in its workforce on managerial and non-managerial posts (ICRC, 2015a). During a recent professional visit to the ICRC delegation in South Sudan, there were employees from 61 nationalities working at the same time on the same project (personal experience). One dominant strand of the literature on culture focuses on the cross-cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1984). Hofstede defines four characteristics of national culture and attempts to measure them - power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity. Later Hofstede added two more dimensions - long/short term orientation and indulgence vs. restraint. Hofstede subsequently specified that the dimensions of his theory are rather meant to differentiate among countries and not so much among individuals (2002). Fougère and Moulettes (2007, p.1) argue that this theory contributes to a division of the world “between a ‘developed and modern’ side (mostly ‘Anglo-Germanic’ countries) and a ‘traditional and backward’ side (the rest)”. A recent study, re-assessing Hofstede’s dimensions, conducted among hospitality management students, found a tendency that national differences were increasingly evening out and becoming less marked (Eringa et al., 2015). Further studies have also

found that country differences account for only a very modest share (2-4 %) of respondents' values variance and that organisational culture differences are in fact more important (Gerhart and Fang, 2005). One could expect that, in humanitarian organisations, one large part of organisational culture, defined in Edgar Schein's words as a "pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group [...] to be taught to new members" (2010, p. 18), is motivated by the desire to help those in need. Walker and Russ (2011), for instance, argue that humanitarian values, including, but not limited to, respect for beneficiaries, independence and impartiality, are particularly strong.

Indeed, the first of seven fundamental principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the principle of humanity: "to prevent and alleviate suffering wherever it may be found" (ICRC and IFRC, 2008, front flyleaf). This is undoubtedly true for many humanitarian aid workers and underlines the not-for-profit character of most humanitarian organisations. Organisational culture is thus another important factor influencing learning in organisations (Prugsamatz, 2010). Further, Hume and Hume (2008, p.132) point out that "organizational culture should be the focal point of all knowledge management programmes". For instance, Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou (2017) describe a clear line between local and expatriate aid workers in some humanitarian organisations. This, according to the authors, is due to differences in managerial style, professional competence based on education and experience, and last, but not least, cultural differences. A report on the topic (ALNAP, 2008) highlights the variety of organisational cultures across the humanitarian sector. Despite this variety, the report's authors see three broad emerging cultural themes, which may well hamper organisational development and change and therefore point to a need for development. First, short planning cycles linked to emergencies make long term strategic thinking, reflection and change difficult. Second, a general focus on products and services in response to problems leads to "an emphasis on the technical nature of [...] change". Third, a general belief that consensus is the best decision-making mechanism prevents "the sort of discussions that are often necessary in a change process" (ALNAP, 2008, p. 51-52.). Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley (2009) further argue that organisational culture, because of its deep-rooted values, especially in the humanitarian

sector, can be quite resistant to change. It can become a limiting factor for organisational development in today's dynamic and interconnected environment.

Because of their "activist culture", humanitarian workers used to see learning as a luxury, separate from, and secondary to "real work", hard to make time and space for (Edwards, 1997, p.238). Bollettino and Bruderlein (2008, p.271) caution that "international non-governmental organisations are notoriously independently minded and sometimes resist the standardisation of their operations and practices".

Nevertheless, today, in line with the ongoing professionalisation of the humanitarian sector, learning initiatives in the humanitarian sector are relatively plentiful and there exists a growing body of research exploring courses, programmes and other learning offers (Bollettino and Bruderlein, 2008; Burrell Storms et al., 2015; Cranmer et al., 2014; Gallardo et al., 2015; Jacquet et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2010; Walker and Russ, 2011). Many of these programmes involve classroom and other course work, e-learning modules, as well as blended learning modules including course-specific coaching and other, more informal, approaches. Indeed, many of the major international humanitarian organisations have devoted significant resources to staff learning and development. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offers online and face-to-face programmes through its Global Learning Center located at the organisation's Budapest headquarters (UNHCR, 2015). The ICRC has created an in-house Humanitarian Leadership and Management School (ICRC, 2014). Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières, MSF) is providing epidemiology training for staff and other humanitarian workers through its Epicentre association (Epicentre, 2013). Overall though, the majority of these programmes are more formal, providing learning through organised access to structured information. They are usually managed by external and in-house learning providers, and include classroom courses, online learning, and generally lead to some kind of certification, from simple attendance certificates to accredited degrees.

In summary, there is a general professionalisation of the humanitarian sector and a need for continued professional development of humanitarian workers. The not-for-profit nature of international humanitarian organisations, the uncertainty, which characterises the contexts in which they work, and the values and organisational culture they are built on, are some of the main features, which distinguish the humanitarian sector from other sectors. However, because of the complexity and diversity of the humanitarian sector, knowledge is very much context dependent. Learning in humanitarian organisations focuses on practical and project experience, reflecting the nature of the humanitarian context. It is essential for humanitarian organisations to support continuously informal learning, socially situated through action and reflection, essential for knowledge sharing and new knowledge creation, both at the intra-organisational and the inter-organisational levels (Edwards, 1997; Guldberg et al., 2013; Verkoren, 2010).

### *1.5.2. The context of the ICRC and staff learning*

In *A Memory of Solferino* (Dunant, American National Red Cross and District of Columbia Chapter, 1959), Henry Dunant, a businessman from Geneva who happened to witness the atrocities of battle in northern Italy in 1859, painted a vivid account of what he saw, and of his experience in improvising immediate relief as best he could. His efforts would lead to the creation in 1863 of what later became the International Committee of the Red Cross, or ICRC (Harouel, 1999).

The ICRC sees itself as an international organisation of its own kind, i.e. neither an intergovernmental nor a nongovernmental organisation (ICRC, 2009). It is not to be confused with the wider International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which also includes 189 national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2015; Vilain, 2002).

The ICRC derives its mandate from international humanitarian law (IHL), one of the most universally accepted bodies of international law (Fleck and Bothe, 2013; Meron, 2009). The ICRC's activities cover a very wide spectrum of humanitarian work, including, under IHL and other relevant

bodies of law, the protection of and assistance to persons affected by conflict and other situations of violence, as well as the development and dissemination of IHL (Blondel, 1987; ICRC, 2009).

Over its first 150 years of existence, the ICRC was able to achieve numerous successes, one measure of which can be seen in the organisation being awarded four Nobel Peace Prizes (Forsythe, 2005). It also faced a number of significant challenges, including most notably its activities, or lack thereof, in favour of the victims of the Holocaust (Enzensberger, 2001; Favez, 1999; Steinacher, 2010) and the need to learn from such experiences. The ICRC's promotion of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action (ICRC, 2009), including its use of confidential dialogue (Rona, 2002) and the fact that membership of its board, the Assembly (Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, 2007), is no longer possible for public office holders (ICRC, 2015b), ultimately gives it access, and is a guarantee of security, in places where other organisations often face larger hurdles.

Over the first hundred years of the ICRC's existence, numbers of persons working for the organisation fluctuated according to events on the world stage. A peak of 3,700 international Red Cross workers was reached towards the end of World War Two, plummeting again to 420 people by 1949. Continuous conflicts from the wars of decolonisation to modern, mostly non-international, armed conflicts have led to exponential growth for the ICRC, the hiring of permanent staff and the development of a personnel policy (Palmieri, 2012). The ICRC today employs over 18,000 staff members in some 80 contexts around the world, with approximately 84% of them in the field employed under local contracts. It is projecting an annual budget of approximately two billion US Dollars (ICRC, 2017). Such figures require an effective, efficient and professional administration, leading some authors to speak of the "humanitarian enterprise", whose *modus operandi* in many ways no longer distinguishes it from other large multinational firms, with the exception, of course, of its *raison d'être* (Palmieri, 2012, p. 1294).

The learning and development offer in the ICRC has been considerably expanded in the last two decades, in parallel with the organisation's growth and pursuit of professionalisation. The

organisation is also engaged in an administrative reform, one of whose main tenets is the establishment of a “unique staffing framework” with equal chances and opportunities for staff with equal competences, regardless of contract (ICRC, 2012b). In terms of professional development, staff members today benefit from a wide offer of learning and development opportunities, which remain, however, mainly in the realm of formal learning. In-house learning and development opportunities range from induction and security awareness courses, through function-specific courses, to management and leadership development programmes, as well as employer-subsidies for external professional courses. Courses are generally organised regionally and include a blend of face-to-face and distance learning, applying various educational methods.

For instance, an induction course for new employees typically involves an online distance-learning phase, a face-to-face phase, and an action-reflection learning phase. During the distance-learning phase, participants study text and video materials on an in-house e-learning platform and get to know each other online through a forum. In the face-to-face phase, facilitated by experienced trainers, a simulated operational experience, including a blend of real-life settings and virtual reality, is offered. Teams of participants must find viable solutions to alleviate the humanitarian consequences arising from armed conflict and natural disaster. The teams experience real-life situations according to a set scenario and are debriefed at the end of each day by seasoned operational staff, who play the role of frontline field managers. Functional experts also take part in the simulation by commenting solutions proposed by the participants. These punctual interventions usually are conducted by telephone or conferencing software. Some common humanitarian activities, such as visits to prisoners of war and other detainees, have been gamified in the course design. Once they are back in their place of work, participants meet in facilitated online action learning groups within the framework of the course, where real-life situations from the participants’ contexts are discussed over a period of three months.

Beyond such more formal course-based learning opportunities, the ICRC is also engaged in exploring options for enhancing other types of more informal learning, to which this study expects to

contribute. Expatriate staff members have long been subject to periodic assignment rotation, enabling them to gain experience in various contexts and in different specialisations within a function, or even across functions. For instance, a staff member in the protection department might start with taking part in prison visits in one context, deal with families separated by conflict in another, and facilitate the movement of people living under occupation in a third. Such rotations thus provide for very varied on-the-job learning, in addition to the above-mentioned more formalised courses available for a particular function. This type of learning is increasingly made available to locally contracted staff members as well. This practice of staff rotation and exposure missions leads to highly diverse teams and the opportunity of developing strong intercultural competences.

How can the skills and knowledge of these highly diverse teams be turned into assets (Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999)? Capturing this huge amount of individual tacit knowledge, and sharing, exploring, developing and testing it in a different context, can contribute in new ways to knowledge creation. Social learning through experience, learning-by-doing, and reflection-in-action are key ways of learning in humanitarian organisations, reflecting the nature of the humanitarian context (Edwards, 1997; Verkoren, 2010). According to the literature, such ways of learning are the primary way of knowledge sharing and new knowledge creation in humanitarian organisations (Guldberg et al., 2013).

Yet, as already noted, practical guidance on how to foster more informal and less structured learning in international humanitarian organisations is limited. This thesis will explore ways for fostering informal learning in international humanitarian organisations. More specifically, it will study communities of practice and other related forms of informal collaborative learning in the ICRC, as a knowledge creation and sharing tool for work-based learning, with the purpose of fostering individual and organisational learning and development. The thesis aims to study how communities of practice and other forms of informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations are conceptualised in the literature, and how such informal collaborative forms of learning are perceived among ICRC employees. Aligning the results of the empirical study conducted among ICRC staff

members with those from the literature review, the thesis aims at drafting practical recommendations on how to improve and further better informal collaborative learning in the ICRC and, potentially, in other international humanitarian organisations.

## 1.6. Personal statement

Being a humanitarian worker myself for over 20 years, I have an in-depth knowledge of the humanitarian field, and a strong interest in exploring and developing it further.

This study has been part of my life for a number of years. More than an intellectual pursuit alone, however rewarding this is in itself, this piece of research speaks to me on several, interconnected, levels. As a trainer and facilitator, my personal motivation lies in wishing to find new ways of learning and creating new knowledge. At the time of conducting the empirical research for this study, I was Head of Learning and Development for the ICRC in Asia, based in Bangkok. By the time of submitting this thesis, I had taken on the function of Head of Learning and Development for the ICRC in Africa, based in Nairobi. Thus, as manager in charge of learning and development of thousands of ICRC staff members in sizeable operational regions, I am also driven by the desire of contributing to organisational development, ultimately leading to what could be called the 'humanitarian learning organisation'. As team leader of growing teams of learning and development professionals, I seek to promote individual and group learning, and thus to improve output. Finally, as humanitarian aid worker, my overall goal is to contribute, in whatever small way, to providing the best possible service to the organisation's beneficiaries.

I believe that the recommendations for fostering communities of practice as a learning and new knowledge creation tool, which emerge through this study, have the potential of contributing to these goals.



## 1.7. Thesis outline

The thesis has five chapters. **Chapter 1** provides the background for the study. It introduces the concepts of workplace and work-based learning, as well as knowledge management. Specificities of the humanitarian sector are discussed, with the aim of better understanding how organisational development can be furthered through work-based learning. Informal learning, facilitated by and blended with ICT, is widely recognised as taking on more and more importance. From this perspective, the study will explore the use of communities of practice and other informal collaborative learning practices as knowledge creation and sharing tools for work-based learning with the purpose of fostering individual and organisational learning and development.

Following this introductory chapter, a literature review in **Chapter 2** outlines the Twentieth Century theoretical fundamentals for modern concepts of workplace learning and principles of adult learning theory. Further, the chapter outlines the conceptual framework of the study. It continues with a definition of communities of practice and other informal instruments for work-based learning, including a historical overview of how the concept has evolved over the years. This is followed by a systematic literature review of scholarly articles on informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations. The chapter is completed by a summary and answer to the first research question - how can collaborative informal learning, as a tool for work-based learning in international humanitarian organisations, be conceptualised?

**Chapter 3** then details the methodology used in the study to address the second research question - how do ICRC managers perceive the significance of, and opportunities for, collaborative informal learning in the ICRC? The chapter addresses research design, sampling, data collection instruments and methods applied for data analysis. Reliability and validity of the study in relation to the research design and the data collection instruments are discussed, and limitations as well as ethical considerations are outlined. A cross-sectional mixed method study was conducted. Building on the outcome of the literature review conducted in chapter 2 and a focus group discussion on

workplace learning with open-ended questions among ICRC staff, a questionnaire for the quantitative survey was drafted and administered. The study was completed with a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews among ICRC staff who had taken part in the quantitative survey.

**Chapter 4** focuses on presenting the empirical findings from the quantitative and qualitative components of the study and answers the second research question. This is coupled with a discussion on how these findings align with the literature background, and thus addresses the third research question – how can informal collaborative learning be improved and furthered better in a practical way in the ICRC?

The thesis closes with **Chapter 5**, which summarises the main findings of the three research questions and outlines the contribution of the study to the literature. The thesis is completed by an outline of areas of interest for future research. The thesis concludes with recommendations for establishing successful technology-driven communities of practice in the ICRC, as a tool for work-based learning, with the purpose of encouraging learning on individual and organisational level in the process of the ICRC becoming a humanitarian learning organisation.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The chapter starts with a comprehensive outline of Twentieth Century theoretical fundamentals for the modern concepts of learning in the workplace presented in Chapter 1, including work-based learning and communities of practice. First, Cultural-Historical Psychology and Activity Theory are introduced. This is followed by a discussion on key principles of the concept of inquiry, adult learning and experiential learning theories. The chapter then outlines the conceptual framework developed for this study. Communities of practice and other concepts and constructs of learning communities are explored, and common elements identified. The chapter is completed by a systematic literature review of scholarly articles on communities of practice and other related concepts of informal collaborative learning, situated in the context of work-based learning in international humanitarian organisations. The chapter ends by giving an answer to the first research question and outlining research gaps.

### 2.1. Cultural-Historical Psychology

The Cultural-Historical approach to neuropsychology and the foundations of Activity Theory are linked to a group of Russian developmental psychologists, among which Lev Vygotsky, Alexander Luria and Aleksei Leontiev, who started their work in Russia at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Their work was not well known to Western scholars until several decades later, once it started to be translated. Vygotsky was the leading scholar (Akhutina, 2003), with the others mainly building on his psychological theory. The term “Cultural-Historical Psychology”, or “theory”, only came into use after his premature death. Vygotsky’s work was mainly focused on child developmental psychology; yet, adult learning today is largely grounded in his work. Concepts and constructs of workplace learning and work-based learning, as well as, ultimately, of knowledge creation, owe much of their theoretical foundations to Vygotsky.

One of the principal contributions of Vygotsky's work was connecting cognition, learning and development of human beings with the historically shaped socio-cultural context (Toomela, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's work was influenced by that of earlier Western philosophers such as Spinoza and Hegel, Marx and Engels, among others (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007). Vygotsky was primarily interested in the process of human development (Vygotsky, 1978). He viewed one's social and individual nature as a holistic unit. According to Vygotsky, social interaction, thus learning in a specific Cultural-Historical context, preceded development; consciousness and cognition were the end product of socialisation and social behaviour. Learning in humans follows a certain practice: "Every function... appears twice, on two levels. First, on the social, and later on the psychological level; first, between people as an inter-psychological category, and then inside the child, as an intra-psychological category. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57). The merging of thought and speech, putting words to one's thoughts and thought to one's words, defined cognitive development. Vygotsky appreciated the role of social, Socratic, dialogue in learning from his own early years' experience with his private tutor (Verenikina, 2010). There is no culturally self-regulated individual without social structures emerging first. Internalisation, i.e. the acceptance of a set of norms and values, established by others, through socialisation and blending with one's consciousness, enables individuals to establish their own working method, which can be implemented in practice. Internalisation is at the core of Cultural-Historical Psychology.

Vygotsky accepted a long-standing philosophical tradition that human beings are not born as free-thinking individuals, but into a world of pre-established social norms and conventions. Human beings actively realise and change themselves in the varied contexts of culture and history (Vygotsky, 1978). However, because of the transformative nature of internalisation, society can be transformed as well. Individuals have the capacity to externalise and share the understanding of their shared experience with other members of their social group. Vygotsky wrote about "height" psychology, which determines the "peak" of one's personality, rather than Freudian "depth", (Yanitsky, 2014).

Vygotsky believed in progress. “For him humanity was on the path of intellectual, scientific and social evolution, creating powerful knowledge and technology and new forms of social organization” (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007, p.71).

Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical perspective can be seen reflected in today’s theories for knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994). As noted in the introductory chapter, tacit and explicit knowledge are in a dynamic process and expand through social interaction in a cycle of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Konno, 1998). Knowledge creation cannot be separated from the context (Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Nonaka and Toyama, 2003), “because such contexts give the basis for one to interpret information and to create meanings” (Nonaka and Toyama 2003, p.3). In addition, the same “reality” can be interpreted differently by different people, and in different times (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007). Further, there might be contradictions between individuals, groups, or within the organisation. Knowledge creation emerges through “the synthesis” of these contradictions (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003).

Similarly to Marx’ dialectical materialism, Cultural-Historical Psychology is a dialectical theory of process, dialectics being the characteristic of the entire learning process, both reproductive and productive. The reproductive part is related to memory, while the productive part is related to creativity and, therefore, imagination (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky built on Marx’ ideas that human practice is the basis for human cognition (Leontiev, 1978). Dialectical theory relates to practice, with practice then expanding and enriching theory, resulting in a balance. Human development is located in human actions and personal development is viewed within societal development. Vygotsky sees both the significance of autonomy and how we owe our status of autonomous selves to history, culture and society (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007). Development is located within emerging relationships when the individual is ready to absorb a new concept. Vygotsky viewed spontaneous concepts following a bottom-up direction, while scientific or non-spontaneous concepts were viewed within a top-down framework (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 1986).

Both directions of development are necessary in establishing a holistic unit and completeness. Vygotsky, seeing learning as a profoundly social process, emphasised dialogue and the varied roles that language plays in instruction and in mediated cognitive growth. The mere exposure of students to new materials through oral lectures neither allows for adult guidance nor for collaboration with peers (Vygotsky, 1978). These ideas are echoed in the concept of work-based learning. As discussed in the introductory chapter, work-based learning integrates practice and theory; learning is viewed as a collaborative and gradually incremental process, tailored to the individual's needs, and situated in the context of work-based activities and defined by a specific work-related problem (Margaryan, 2008).

Another concept attributed to Vygotsky, essential for collaborative learning, is known as the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86), assuming that under an expert's guidance one can learn to accomplish tasks, which normally could not be performed independently.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is the foundation of the concept of scaffolding in learning, introduced by Wood and Bruner, also child cognitive psychologists (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976). Scaffolding is a pedagogical method that enables learners to solve a problem, which would be beyond their unassisted efforts. Scaffolding consists in a more competent person, hereafter referred to as "teacher", "controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence." (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976, p.90). Scaffolding is a temporary and adjustable process, akin to scaffolding in construction, which is removed upon completion of the building (Sawyer, 2008). It focuses on the development of the learner, and requires a collaborative interaction between learner and "teacher". Over time, the learner becomes more independent and able to self-regulate the process (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotsky, one of the main

aspects of development is the ability of the learner to control and direct his or her own behaviour (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another defining characteristic of work-based learning, which can be extracted from Vygotsky's work, is the purposefulness of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Work-based learning is driven by a work-related problem. Similarly, Vygotsky believed that human activity is purposeful. Additionally, learning is motivated by extrinsic rewards, including words of appreciation, as well as positive and encouraging peer influence.

Human activity is also carried out by sets of actions through the use of signs and tools (Crawford and Hasan, 2006; Nardi, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). The use of signs and tools is essential for human development, and involves mediated activity (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, "signs are internally oriented means of psychological influence aimed at mastering oneself; tools, on the other hand, are externally oriented, aimed at mastering and triumphing over nature" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.127). Speech, the nature of social behaviour and mind, is the most important human sign. Signs and tools allow learners to become more efficient in problem solving and adaptation. An example of a tool, extensively used in the Twenty-First Century, is the computer and ICT in general. As a developmental tool, ICT should give learners advantages to achieve their goals and satisfy existing needs in a more efficient way, thus improving performance. The ways in which ICT can facilitate work-based learning were discussed at length in Chapter 1.

## 2.2. Activity Theory

Vygotsky's psychology of human cognition emerging through practical activity in a social environment is at the base of Activity Theory (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). An individual cannot be understood without society and vice versa (Engeström, 2001). People are not only immersed in a socio-cultural context, but they actively interact with it and change it (Verenikina, 2010). "Activity Theory is all about who is doing what, why and how" (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014, p.9). The foundations of the concept were laid by Vygotsky, the term Activity Theory was coined by

Leontiev, and the theory was later elaborated by Engeström, as illustrated below (Figure 6) (Engeström, 2001).

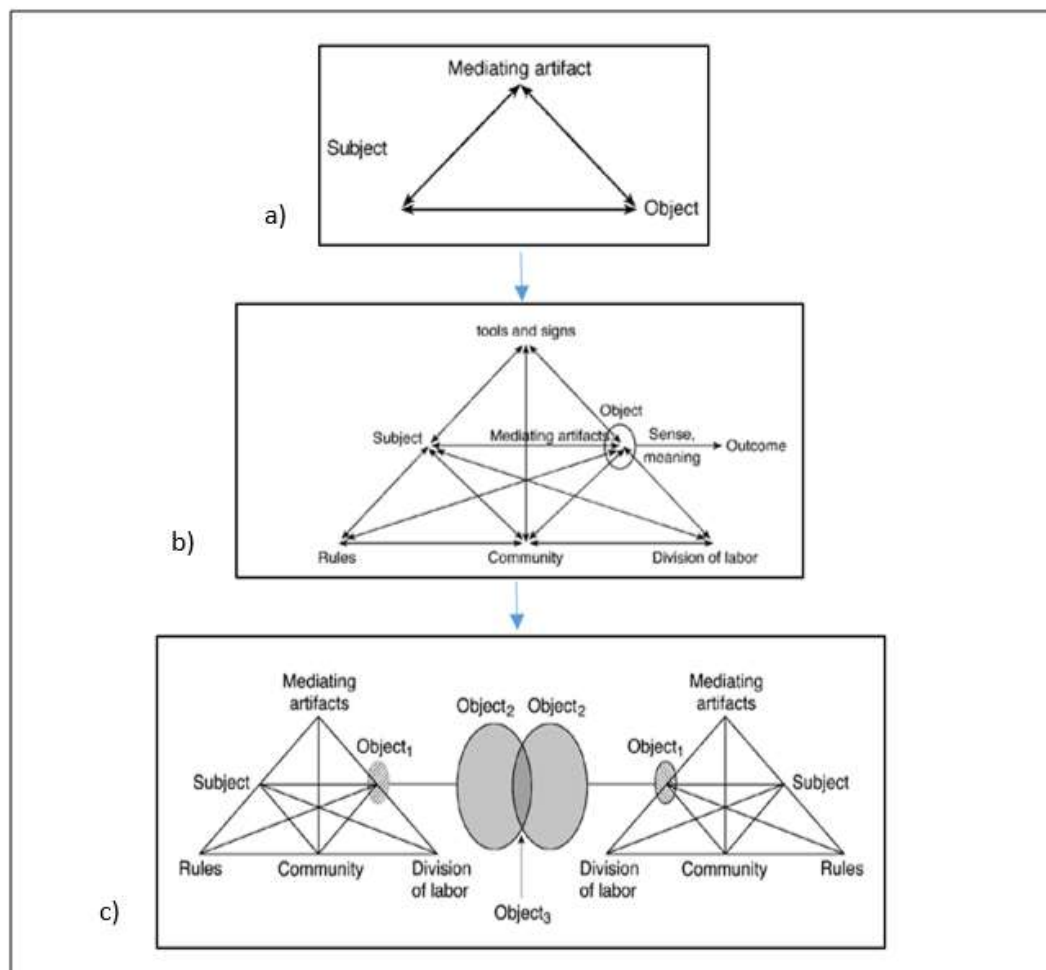
Activity Theory has become very popular over the last few decades for its applicability to the area of human-computer interaction (Engeström, 1996; Nardi, 1996; Verinikina, 2010), in particular in relation to educational technologies (Nardi, 1996; Verinikina, 2010). Humans are continually changing objects and creating artefacts, or tools. “This complex interaction of individuals with their surroundings has been called activity and is regarded as the fundamental unit of analysis. Activity, according to Leontiev, “[...] has its own structure, internal transitions and transformations and its own development” (Verinikina, 2010, p. 20). Leontiev understood activity as a “holistic, high-level, usually collaborative construct” (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014, p.10).

Engeström defines three generations of Activity Theory (2001). Beginning with Vygotsky’s work, the core of an activity is being formed between the dialectical relationship of subject (individual(s)) and object (purpose), mediated by tools (Engeström, 2001), as illustrated in figure 6a. This is a two-way process: activity is mediated by tools, which are, in turn, mediated by activities, thus leading to change and development in the tools and in the activity. Tools can be primary (physical), secondary (language, ideas, models, etc.) or tertiary (communities, context, or environments) (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014). The outcomes of an activity can be intended or unintended. An activity is seen as object-oriented, which can be both objective and subjective (Engeström 2001; Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014), thus creating an opportunity for thesis and a valid antithesis, “and that a synthesis of the thesis and its antithesis gives a richer understanding of reality” (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014, p.10). This initial model of Vygotsky is referred to as first generation Activity Theory. Learning, in this model, albeit in a socio-cultural-historical context and mediated by tools, is individually centred. This issue was addressed by Leontiev, who studied and explained the difference between individual and collective activity and the interaction between them in the context of a cultural and historical environment (Engeström, 2001). According to Nardi (1996, p.7), Activity Theory “focuses on practice, which obviates the need to distinguish ‘applied’ from ‘pure’ science—understanding everyday practice



in the real world is the very objective of scientific practice [...] The object of activity theory is to understand the unity of consciousness and activity". As a result Activity Theory started being applied to numerous fields outside the field of child cognitive psychology, including to the study of work (Engeström, 2001).

Figure 6. Evolution of Activity Theory.



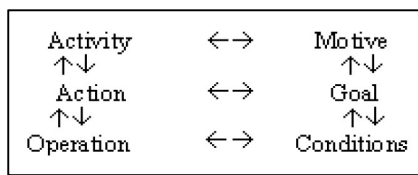
a) Vygotsky's reformulated simple triangle model of a mediated act (1978)

b) Engeström's structure of a human activity system (1987)

c) Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for the third generation of activity theory, Engeström (2001).

(Adapted from Engeström, 2001).

Figure 7. The activity hierarchy of Leontiev, 1981 (Crawford and Hasan, 2006, p.51).



Leontiev suggested the so called “activity hierarchy”, illustrated in figure 7 (Crawford and Hasan, 2006, p.51). Activity is on top of the hierarchy and is inspired by a motive. It requires a continuity of conscious actions with specific goals, and unconscious operations, determined by conditions and tasks. The elements are dynamically interconnected. Actions are not meaningful unless they are part of an activity (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014). Actions can become activities, and vice versa, motives and goals can change, depending on the context. This can be illustrated with an example from a facilitator’s work. A common activity for a group facilitator is to organise an event to further group cohesion. The facilitator will have to prepare for such an event with different conscious actions, for instance a discussion, by framing, asking and listening to answers to open-ended questions. For this action, some unconscious operations will be necessary, such as organising group members to gather in a virtual or real space and talk; there will be need of certain conditions such as a computer and an internet connection in case of virtual events, such as webinars, online workshops, etc., or a room or other space in case of a face-to-face event in a physical space. Once the activity of organising and conducting such an event is mastered, a new activity begins. In this example, the new activity could be leading a group with the purpose of producing and improving an outcome. In this new activity, organising and conducting an event remains just a conscious action. Different actions might be possible for the same activity. Once again, when the activity of leading a group is mastered, it will become part of the chain of actions for another activity, such as for instance knowledge creation in the organisation with the purpose or motive of organisational development, and so the process goes on. In real-life situations, Kaptelinin (1996) argues, it is very important to differentiate between motives, goals and conditions, as they are predictors of human behaviour.

Leontiev did not develop Vygotsky's original model into a construct of a collective activity system (Engeström, 2001). This was done by Engeström by means of his structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 1987), which includes the elements of subject, object, tools, rules, division of labour and community, shown in figure 6b. The core of an activity is again formed by the dialectical relationship of subject (individual(s)) and object (purpose). However, this is mediated by tools and by the community with rules and a division of labour (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014). All elements of the activity system are in complex interrelation (Engeström, 2001). In addition, the object of the activity is separated from the outcome, as there might be different outcomes, which cannot always be anticipated (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014).

Second generation Activity Theory provides an explanation of "how people collaborate, i.e. carry out purposeful collective activities, with the assistance of sophisticated tools (information systems) in the complex dynamic settings of modern organizations" (Hasan and Kazlauskas, 2014, p.12). It accounts for the environment, the history of the person, culture, the role of the artefact, motivations, and the complexity of real life activity. Tensions and contradictions within the elements of the activity system, through collaborative effort, can be addressed through reconceptualisation of the object and the motive and lead to expansive changes (Engeström, 2001).

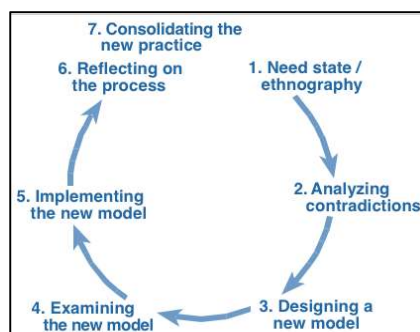
Activity Theory became very popular through Engeström's model of activity systems, as it had been adapted to be applied to adult learning at work. For instance, Margaryan (2008) looks at technology-enhanced work-based learning as an activity system. According to Margaryan (2008), the tools or "instruments" of the activity system should be well specified for the context of work-based learning, so that integration of learning and work, and formal and informal learning, is achieved.

However, Cole (1988) thought that second generation Activity Theory is not addressing adequately enough the cultural diversity of a context. Differences in cultural background and different historical experiences between individuals might make processes of social identification and collaborative learning more difficult (Rohde et al., 2007). Cultural diversity, multiple perspectives, and interacting activity systems thus inspired the development of third generation Activity Theory, shown

in figure 6c (Engeström, 2001). The model includes at least two interacting activity systems. The object of the activity is not a static target, or a mere sum of two objects. It is dynamic and evolving, and driven by a larger longer-term motive (Engeström, 2001).

The Helsinki Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (2017) outlined some of the updated basic principles of Activity Theory. First, Activity Theory is historically grounded and longitudinal; it focuses on object-oriented, mediated activity systems; analyses contradictions within and between activity systems as a motive for change and development; constructs future-oriented zones of proximal development in activity systems; and supports expansive learning and Change Laboratory methodology. Expansive learning is based on questioning existing practice (Engeström, 2001), illustrated in figure 8. In his theory of expansive learning, Engeström (2001) questions the need of a “teacher”, or other more competent person, from Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. “The problem is that much of the most intriguing kinds of learning in work organizations violates this presupposition. People and organizations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time” (Engeström, 2001, p.137). The expansive cycle starts with questioning the current activity and analysis of contradictive situations; this is followed by identifying a new form of an activity, with new logic for the purpose of the activity and resulting in a new model of the activity. The new model is further tested in practice. The cycle continues with a reflection on the new practice, consolidation and spread (Figure 8). The elements of this cycle are incorporated into the concept of the Change Laboratory.

Figure 8. Cycle of expansive learning (Engeström, 2001, p.152).



With his expansive theory of learning, Engeström (2001) complements Vygotsky's theories of vertical learning with horizontal or sideways learning. The Change Laboratory creates the opportunity for collaborative construction of the zone of proximal development by the participants in an activity. The outcome is not predetermined, and the outcomes are designed by the participants. Tension is the main engine of change in any activity system: "The internal tensions and contradictions of such a system are the motive force of change and development" (Engeström, Miettinen and Punamäki, 1999, p. 9). Some see expansive learning as a bridge between individual and organisational learning (Virkkunen and Newnham, 2013). In addition, as already discussed, collaborative expansive patterns of thinking and working provide a solid base for a learning organisation (Senge, 1990). It will be further argued below, that Engeström's third generation of dynamically interacting activity systems, as well as Wenger's evolution of understanding of communities of practice, ultimately transforming into new structures, describe similar phenomena as the learning organisation. In summary, Engeström elaborated Activity Theory, gave it a structure, took it out of the sphere of child psychology, and applied it to adult and collaborative learning at work. The next section of this chapter will look into the main principles of adult learning theory and experiential learning, reflected in the concepts of communities of practice and work-based learning.

## 2.3. Adult learning theory and experiential learning

### *2.3.1. The concept of inquiry*

John Dewey, a late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century American psychologist, is often referred to as one of the forefathers of informal learning (Marsick et al., 2006). Dewey's concepts of learning were similar to Vygotsky's (Postholm, 2008). Dewey believed that learning must engage with, and enlarge, experience. Dewey promoted pragmatism, strongly relying on human experience (Morgan, 2014). Experience, for Dewey, always has an emotional side, and is social (Morgan, 2014).

Learning, according to Dewey, grows out of first-hand experience and is shaped by the learner, with the teacher acting more as facilitator (Dewey, 1938; Wells, 2000). This helps learners to bring about their own learning, thus arguably enhancing meaning and relevance for each learner (Schunk, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2008).

According to Dewey, some of the experiences are based on “habit”, from previous experience, and some on “inquiry”, for future experience (Morgan, 2014). These ideas resonate with Vygotsky’s concept of learning, with a reproductive part, related to memory, and a productive part, related to creativity and imagination. The role of inquiry for learning can be traced back to ancient philosophers like Aristotle, and is well defined in the work of Peirce: “this sole, rule of reason, that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think, there follows one corollary which itself deserves to be inscribed upon every wall of the city of philosophy: Do not block the way of inquiry” (Peirce, 1899, pp.135-40). Building on Peirce, Dewey developed the concept of inquiry, and of community of inquiry, emphasising the experiential and social aspects of inquiry (Deters, 2005). The “inquiry” for Dewey starts with recognising a problem, defining it, then developing, reflecting on and evaluating possible actions, and finally applying the actions into practice to address the problem (Morgan, 2014).

A community of inquiry is generally defined as any group of individuals involved in a process of empirical or conceptual inquiry into problematic situations with knowledge being embedded within a social context. Inquiry, according to Wells (2000), is an attitude towards experience and ideas, the desire to ask questions and find answers by collaborating with others, and thus promoting development (Biza, Jaworski and Hemmi, 2014). Dewey looked at learning as a process, where experience is the starting point. Similar to Leontiev’s hierarchy of activity, Dewey (1938), points out that the knowledge gained in one situation turns into an instrument to manage in the next situation. The process continues, as long as life and learning go on (Dewey, 1938). The main aim of education for Dewey was learning to learn, thus developing the ability of lifelong learning (Kivinen and Ristela,

2003). Dewey also believed that the meaning of life is in “growth”, eternally adding to the meaning of life (Kivinen and Ristela, 2003), again corroborating Vygotsky’s ideas about “height” psychology.

A later model of learning at individual, group and organisational levels, linked to the concept of inquiry, is the single- and double loop learning model of Argyris (1976). The first loop focuses learning on improvement of what has been done. The second loop enables changes in goals driven by experience, thus generating new ideas and new approaches. Double loop learning can drive change as it “occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies, and objectives” (Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 3). More often than not, such learning will not occur in a formal classroom setting, “they would try to find the most competent people for the decision to be made, and would try to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group would be to maximize the contributions of each member so that when a synthesis was developed, the widest possible exploration of views would have taken place. Finally, if new concepts were formulated, the meaning given to them by the formulator and the inference processes used to develop them would be open to scrutiny by those who were expected to use them” (Argyris, 1976, p.369). In the double loop model, in contrast to the single loop, inquiry is seen as a strength.

Dewey’s ideas also resonate with more modern learning theories, including adult learning theory and experiential learning theory (Knowles, 1973; Kolb, 1984; Miettinen, 2000).

### *2.3.2. Adult learning and experiential learning theory*

Adult learning theory was considerably developed by Knowles (1973). Knowles (1968) used the term andragogy, synonymous to adult learning, referring to the “art and science” of adult learning. He initially based andragogical theory on “at least four main assumptions” (Knowles, 1973, p.45). First, adults are characterised by a self-concept of essential self-direction. Second, previous experience is a rich source for learning for adults and is a base to which new learning can be related. Third, adults’ readiness to learn is a function of a need related to a life situation or developmental task; and fourth,

adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented. Later editions of Knowles' text speak of "several assumptions", also including adult learners' need to be aware why they should learn something, and adult learners' responsiveness to mostly internal motivators such as a desire for increased self-esteem. These assumptions have been summarised into "the six principles of andragogy [...] 1) the learner's need to know, 2) self-concept of the learner, 3) prior experience of the learner, 4) readiness to learn, 5) orientation to learning, and 6) motivation to learn" (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2012, p.3).

Even children learners, over time, become more independent and better able to self-regulate the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). The encouragement of self-directed learning is at the core of adult learning (Tennant, 1998). Self-directed learning includes the skill of the learner to know what to learn and how to learn it, as well as to evaluate the outcome. In addition, self-directed learning also includes "critical awareness", i.e. the skill of the learner to challenge assumptions. This process can be accomplished with or without the support of a "teacher" (Caruth, G. and Caruth, D., 2013, p.38). However, not all adults are fully capable of self-teaching in every learning situation (Caruth, G. and Caruth, D., 2013, p.38), and "teachers" must tailor their teaching methods to different learning styles. Thus, self-directed learning is leading to the continuous growth and maturity of the learner (Tennant, 2003).

One of the other principal defining characteristics of adult learning is that it must be grounded in experience – past, current, and, one could argue, even future experience. First, the past experience of learners should be acknowledged, and any further learning should be built on top of it. Second, current practice, likewise, informs learning. And third, the knowledge created in this way relates to the knowledge base of the future, the process of lifelong learning. Thus, the seeds of future experience are already present in today's learning. This concept is very closely related to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Dewey's beliefs on experience and learning. "Teachers" thus should adapt their teaching methods and tailor them to individual needs. The importance of establishing a relationship between the learner and the "teacher" is discussed by many authors (Rogers,



Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989; Tennant, 2006). Adult learners appreciate a collaborative relationship with their “teachers”, characterised by openness, mutual respect and equality (Tennant, 2006). Biza, Jaworski and Hemmi (2014) discuss the communities of learners and “teachers” that are formed, develop and interact in a university mathematics environment. According to Biza, Jaworski and Hemmi (2014), all participants, both learners and “teachers”, should be engaged in the same practice – learning. “Students are encouraged to ask mathematical questions and seek their own way of expressing mathematical ideas; the teacher looks critically at her own practice, with evidence from the research, and seeks to modify it to be more aligned with the aims of the innovation” (Biza, Jaworski and Hemmi, 2014, pp.161-176).

This active involvement of learners also requires the continuous reflection on prior and current experience (Tennant, 2003). The central role of experience in the learning process is detailed in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.38).

Kolb (1984) outlines several characteristics of experiential learning. First, he sees learning as a process where new ideas are formed and continuously changed by experience. Second, continuous learning is grounded in experience. Knowledge comes from and is tested out in the experience of the learner. Learning, on one side introduces new ideas, and, on the other, has to remove or change old ones. This latter process is often more difficult, as people often shape their practice on existing ideas (Argyris and Schön, 1974 cited by Kolb, 1984, p.29). Third, the process of learning necessitates the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed concepts. Further, Kolb, akin to Dewey, sees learning as a holistic process, involving thinking, as well as feeling, perceiving and behaving with the purpose of human adaptation to the world. This view of learning bridges learning and work and presents learning as a continuous lifelong process. Finally, experiential learning involves a constant exchange between the learner and the environment. Learning changes the object, e.g. the environment, and the subject, e.g. the person, leading to the process of knowledge creation.

“Knowledge is a transformation process being continuously created and re-created, not an independent entity to be acquired and transmitted” (Kolb, 1984, p.38).

Developing adult learning theory, Knowles finally concluded that the principal difference between adult and child learners is that adults usually have more experience than children (Payne et al., 2009). “Learning should be based upon such experience” (Payne et al., 2009, p.548), as maturity is reached at different ages (Caruth, G. and Caruth, D., 2013). A learner-centred approach, “teaching different adults differently and different children differently” (Caruth, G. and Caruth, D., 2013, p.41), would thus appear most appropriate. It could be challenging to develop an individual curriculum for each learner (Huang, 2002). However, modern ICT could offer a solution to this challenge: “it will be possible to have twenty-five curricula for twenty-five students based on the assistance of information technology” (Huang, 2002, p.32).

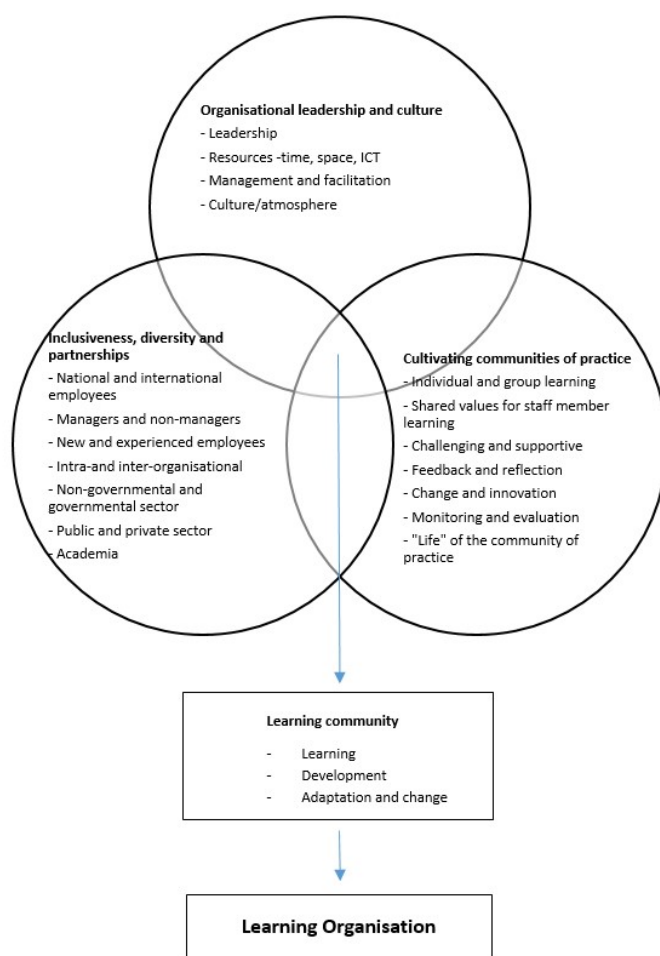
Resonating with Knowles’ later inclusion of motivation as one of the principles of andragogy, Huang (2002) sees the learner-centred approach to learning and learner self-directedness as motivating factors for learning. In addition, Huang (2002) stresses the importance of the adult learner being able to control the learning process with respect to authenticity and quality of the information, especially in the case of e-learning. Luckin et al. (2016) further argue that future (and to some extent already present) technology could provide even greater tools for blended learning. ICT may even come to be not just a tool, but a lifelong learning companion driven by artificial intelligence, akin to a virtual peer or virtual coach (Luckin et al., 2016). On the other hand, Huang (2002) cautions that such interactions with computers could lead to a loss of humanity and social isolation. According to Luckin et al. (2016), the future of learning for humans will shift to the application of knowledge, its evaluation, and further knowledge creation.

## 2.4. Conceptual framework

In order to address the research gaps and research questions defined in Chapter 1, a conceptual framework is used for organising the main ideas of the study. This conceptual framework

is based on the concept of communities of practice, as a knowledge management tool for work-based learning, with the purpose of fostering individual and organisational learning and development. Its design was inspired by Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organisation, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's (2002) concept of communities of practice, as well as Bolam et al.'s (2005) model of professional learning communities and further literature on communities of practice, which will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter. The conceptual framework is depicted with three overlapping circles, reflecting the fluidity and interaction between the different elements, and the "wholeness" of learning and development. These various aspects will be elaborated on through the discussion of communities of practice below.

*Figure 9. Conceptual framework. International Humanitarian Organisations becoming Learning Organisations through Communities of Practice as Knowledge Management Tool.*



### *2.4.1. Communities of practice*

*How to develop and keep up to date a highly diverse workforce working in volatile and dynamically changing humanitarian contexts around the world?*

So far, the literature review, spanning more than a hundred years, has shown that lifelong learning has become essential (Dewey, 1938). “Knowledge has become the key to success...Companies need to understand precisely what knowledge will give them a competitive advantage. They then need to keep this knowledge on the cutting edge, deploy it, leverage it in operations, and spread it across the organization. Cultivating communities of practice in strategic areas is a practical way to manage knowledge as an asset, just as systematically as companies manage other critical assets” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p.6).

Human development seems to be thriving when socially situated, and when knowledge is created through experience, reflection and sharing with others. This is especially valid in today’s world, where knowledge changes rapidly and significantly (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Addressing complex problems may require more than one perspective. At the same time, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) argue that individual knowledge is very important. As already noted, tacit knowledge is highly personal, deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement (Nonaka, 1994). Communities of practice are entities in which tacit knowledge can be created, shared and retained. Tacit knowledge is best shared through informal learning processes, including conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The capture of tacit knowledge, its documentation and thus transformation into explicit knowledge, reflects the process of knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994). However, to implement this explicit knowledge into practice is again dependent on tacit knowledge, i.e. the know-how, which may well be done through communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Knowledge, according to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), lies in the human act of knowing. The authors give the explicit example

of surgery – a person in need of surgery will not ask a friend who has read many books on surgery and feels ready to perform one to do it, but will go to the surgeon who has already performed many successful operations, who works in a team and constantly evaluates and re-evaluates the evolution of the surgical procedure.

### *Evolution of the concept of communities of practice*

Learning occurs through participation, interaction and engagement (Johnson, 2007). Based on Vygotskian social learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term community of practice almost three decades ago. The idea of communities of practice is not new and is reflected in the first social learning structures since cave-dwelling times (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Historically, the term “community” has been a dynamic concept, broadly referring to a small or large group of people, which has evolved intentionally or naturally around a common interest or purpose (Lenning et al., 2013). Lave and Wenger (1991) saw social co-participative learning in the context of real-life activities at the base of situated learning theory and the concept of communities of practice. Over the years, the focus of the concept evolved (Cox, 2005; Li et al., 2009). Initially, the concept of communities of practice for learning was closely linked to learning through apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Li et al., 2009). Lave and Wenger (1991) generally defined communities of practice as a group of people from the same trait, who work together and learn to improve their practice. The authors introduced the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” as a way of learning, where newcomers to an organisation socialise with experts, and learn by slowly building practical skills. Over time, newcomers might change places in their community membership and become experts themselves. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation addresses how people become members of a community of practice, or, on the contrary, are excluded from it.

Brown and Duguid (1991) also support the role of the social environment and the idea of communities of practice as a way of learning in organisations. In addition, Brown and Duguid (1991) write about the importance of improvisation and the creation of new knowledge through a

combination of work, learning, and innovation, ultimately leading to organisational learning (Cox, 2005; Li et al., 2009). Brown and Duguid (1991) seem to see everyone involved as equals. Brown and Duguid (1991) stress the importance of actual practice and knowledge emerging through this process of collaboration, in effect reaching solutions in spite of, rather than thanks to, espoused, “canonical” practice, prescribed by management. A reference to communities of inquiry, as discussed earlier, can be made. “A community of inquiry is a community of practice in which inquiry is a fundamental way of being in practice [...] A community of inquiry transforms a community of practice to promote development” (Biza, Jaworski and Hemmi, 2014, p.164, p.171).

Several years later, Wenger (1998) further defined three dimensions of communities of practice – mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Mutual engagement refers to the interaction between members of a community of practice, which leads to the creation of a shared meaning related to issues or a problem. Mutual engagement is neither simply a team working together on a topic, nor a network of relations among people for information flow, nor a group of people bound together because of geographical proximity. The members of a community of practice are “organized around what they are there to do” (Wenger, 1998, p.74). Joint enterprise reflects the process of the mutually engaged group working towards a common goal. Shared repertoire is related to the common tools, understood in a broad sense, which the community of practice uses to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are about learning. The sharing of knowledge, the passionate interest of the members to improve practice, itself leading to knowledge creation and innovation, are central to their work (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Communities of practice, according to Wenger (1998, p.86), “can be thought of as shared histories of learning”. In addition to learning and knowledge, members of a community of practice get support, confidence, and exposure to different values, creating a sense of belonging and leading to a possible re-shaping of their identity (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). For the first time, Li et al. (2009) note, Wenger raised the role of conflict as an integral part of mutual engagement. Cox (2005) further argued

that a creative collaborative community should involve challenge, disagreement and conflict. Alternatively, a “harmonious” community of practice could become a new domineering norm.

On one hand, communities of practice can be seen as activity systems with subjects, objects and tools. However, communities of practice are diverse and complex, not particularly well defined structures. They can be small or large, homogenous or heterogeneous, spontaneous or intentional, with or without physical boundaries, intra- or inter-organisational. A community of practice can be a very dynamic structure, ever-changing and transforming; getting old and then young again, trying always to learn and find value for the individual member and for the organisation. Individual value is very important to keep members coming back to the community. Individual value can lie in finding solutions for immediate professional issues, or in the professional development and growth of a community member over time. New members come, some old members go; new goals are formed, and new tools are put in use, including modern ICT and how to foster its use.

This evolution of communities of practice is reflected in the later works of Wenger and colleagues (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice have been re-defined as “groups of people, who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.4). “Keywords of the new discourse are passion, informality (=authentic, voluntary) and diversity” (Cox, 2005, p.14). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) came to see communities of practice as a major knowledge management tool for organisations, suggesting that organisations should “cultivate” communities of practice to increase their competitiveness (Li et al., 2009). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) re-defined the dimensions of community of practice to domain, community and practice. Domain refers to knowledge about a topic, including know-how and highly specialised professional expertise; community refers to the social structure in which people interact, learn and build relationships; and practice refers to the tools, ideas, and frameworks community members share (Chua, 2002; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Further, Wenger defined seven principles of communities of practice: 1) a design for evolution, not imposing fixed

structures; 2) open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, 3) different levels of participation, based on the interest and commitment of members; 4) public events for all community members, and private, one-to-one, community spaces; the latter being very important in the initial stages of forming a community of practice; 5) focus on value and relevance to the organisation; 6) a combination of familiarity and excitement; and 7) the creation of a rhythm for the community, suitable for its members (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Johnson (2007, p.278) argues that “communities of practice are best seen as ‘action learning spaces’, in which engagement in learning and knowledge production takes place within complex social histories and relations and is thus a contested process”. Thus, through action learning, hierarchical structures in an organisation can be managed and more diverse or marginal groups of employees or people be accommodated and given the opportunity to be heard, which could further support organisational development (Johnson, 2007).

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) outline five stages of community development and compare it to a romantic relationship (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). The first stage, usually dependent on several passionate people, is to see the potential and determine the domain of interest for further learning, beneficial to the individual employee and to the organisation as a whole. The second stage is called “coalescing” and refers to establishing trust among community members and discovering the value of sharing experiences and being in a community. “Communities thrive on trust” (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008, p.17). The establishment of trust is a process, which requires patience. The third stage, called “maturing” by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), refers to putting into place of a rhythm and of roles of the community members, and a position of the community in the organisation. The fourth stage is called “stewarding” and refers to making a difference in the practice of the organisation, through the creation of new knowledge. The last, “transforming”, stage refers to the progress of the community, evolving into a new structure, losing some members, gaining new ones, and shifting domains. One could summarise the five stages of the life of a community of practice into the “5 Ps” of passion, patience, position, practice and progress.



However, as Chua (2002) notes, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) did not provide any real-life examples illustrating how the five stages of a community of practice are reflected in practice. Even so, contemporary authors such as Bailey (2017) consider the concept of community of practice very helpful, noting that “communities of practice are context-dependent so no one practitioner will be able to follow a community of practice blueprint step by step” (Bailey, 2017, p.73).

In summary, over the years the concept of communities of practice has evolved from apprenticeship-like learning for professional development to a knowledge management, creation and sharing tool, supporting organisational competitiveness and development (Li et al., 2009). Referring to Brown and Duguid’s (1991) notion of ascendancy of actual practice over directive approaches in communities of practice, Cox (2005, p.7) notes that it is somehow “paradoxical also to see how collaboration triggered by alienation can be turned into a management tool”. Communities of practice “are a social instrument to create, share and steward knowledge, including tacit knowledge” (Cox, 2005, p.10). This is particularly the case in combination with other knowledge management tools, including ICT and social networks, among others.

### *Communities of practice, ICT and networks*

The fast development of ICT has led to some false expectations regarding technology in relation to knowledge management and communities of practice (Huysman and Wulf, 2005). Initially, it was expected that ICT would have a major role in the knowledge management process, providing knowledge repositories on one hand and enabling the transfer of knowledge, via intranets, on the other. The role of ICT then became less central, rather to be seen in helping people stay connected (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Huysman and Wulf (2005, p.81) argue that “more attention is given to systems that play a role in building and sustaining the relational base of communities than to ones that contain and help to distribute ‘knowledge’”, because knowledge is not useful if stored, and people will not use an intranet simply because it exists. The focus of ICT in relation to the knowledge management process should thus be on connecting people

in addition to collecting knowledge (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; Venters and Wood, 2007). Communities of practice require relatively simple technological tools, such as discussion forums, online libraries, and teleconferencing (McDermott and Archibald, 2010).

Especially in large international organisations, communities are virtual, aiming at establishing a balance between face-to-face and online meetings (Cox, 2005; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Such communities, where members meet both online and in person, seem to offer the best of both worlds, as they “provide ready access to knowledge and resources without the usual limitations of time, space, and pace”, yet offer the opportunity “to socialize in person” (Blitz, 2013, pp.i). In pure online communities, motivation is seen as more of a challenge, probably because of a greater isolation of participants (Blitz, 2013).

A community of practice is not equivalent to a social network (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). A social network “refers to a set of connections among people, whether or not these connections are mediated by technological networks” (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011, p.9). As a result of these personal relationships, knowledge is shared, problems are eventually solved and new connections made (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). Communities and networks, according to Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011), complement each other on the level of social learning. Community members are usually in some form of network relations, and networks usually exist because of some common domain (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). Networks span beyond organisational boundaries, and if such networks are not recognised and used, new knowledge is missed (Milligan, Littlejohn and Margaryan, 2014).

### *Facilitation and management of communities of practice*

Up to now, the role of the individual learner was discussed at length. Adult education theory stresses the importance of involving adults in the planning and evaluation of their learning. Yet, there still is an important role for “teachers”. Wenger, differentiates between the role of the “leader” of a community of practice and the role of the “facilitator”. The leader is responsible mainly for spreading

the information about the community, inviting people, finding resources. The role of the facilitator is central in Wenger's community of practice and relates mainly to facilitating contacts between individuals (Cox, 2005; Li et al., 2009; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002; Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). The facilitator's enthusiasm, and potential fatigue, are discussed as key elements for the sustainability of the community of practice (Beattie, 2006; Li et al., 2009; Pereles, 2002). Who can be a facilitator of a community of practice in an organisation? Can a manager or team leader be a community of practice facilitator? How can team leaders be prepared for being learning facilitators? These are all questions, which are addressed individually in each case, depending on the organisation, the size of the community of practice, and available human resources, among other factors. Pässilä and Owens (2016) write about "Manager learning communities" (2016). Through reflective practice following the use of drama and storytelling, managers evolve from being knowledge managers to becoming knowledge facilitators (Pässilä and Owens, 2016, p. 193). McDermott and Archibald (2010) argue that leading a team is different from leading a community. However, the authors continue, senior managers are expected to be involved in the communities of practice in their organisations, though not as facilitators, but by showing support (McDermott and Archibald, 2010). Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) further analyse the difference between a general facilitator, who might see better whether the community is moving in the right direction, yet who cannot fully understand the complexity of the practice, and a facilitator-practitioner. It would be very difficult for a facilitator, who is not part of the community, to involve the community. On the other hand, a facilitator-practitioner, or a specialist, should be careful not to dominate the direction the community takes, and should learn to listen to the community members. A way to manage this risk, Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) suggest, is to question one's own practice, to use one's own contacts to get other opinions. In comparison to facilitating a course, facilitating a community of practice takes longer, is more complex, less visible, as well as less structured and defined by end results. Networking is a core element of facilitation and takes place in private and public spaces. Facilitation contributes to more creative growth of the network (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008).

Communities of practice can drive organisational strategies and can assist organisations in finding and implementing solutions to complex situations (Murray and Carter, 2005). Cox (2005, p.17) highlights that mainstream thought on communities of practice can be seen as a “benign form of management ideology”, perhaps as a response to today’s overall higher level of education of employees, as well as changing attitudes towards organisational hierarchy, and the promotion of empowerment. However, Cox (2005) also notes that, even though communities of practice connect personal and organisational development, supporting such more expansive ways of learning could lead to divergence from organisational goals. “Free thinking communities of practice are likely to diverge on their own path and become an autonomous influence in organisational politics” (Cox, 2005, p.18). In addition, Cox (2005), referring to Misztal (2000, cited in Cox, 2005, p.18), cautions about the possible risks related to the concept of “informality” of communities of practice, which may lead to rules protecting individual employees to be relaxed in favour of “a vision of harmonious community”, which could be oppressive as a covert form of control. Other potential weaknesses of a community of practice, pointed out by Wenger, could be a temptation for ownership and formation of cliques (Chua, 2002). In this regard, McDermott and Archibald (2010) argue that communities of practice should be managed “strategically” and focus on issues important to the organisation, in order to stay relevant. This, according to the authors, is especially applicable today in the fast-paced times of the internet, access to endless information on all topics and a possibility to connect people all over the globe, and at the same time an overall shortage of time. This is a somewhat opposite view from the concept of a community thriving because it functions independently, and that too much interference from management might suppress natural collaboration in a group (McDermott and Archibald, 2010).

### *Measuring the performance of communities of practice*

Finally, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) discuss the importance of measuring the value of knowledge for improving the visibility and accountability of the work of a community of practice and ultimately the results achieved by the organisation. Chua (2002) points out that Wenger,

McDermott and Snyder (2002) have compiled one of the most comprehensive works on knowledge measurement, by focusing on community activities, including the collection of stories; on the knowledge resources produced; and on knowledge application to practice for obtaining results. As a way of measuring the performance of communities of practice, Verburg and Andriessen (2006) have developed a “community assessment toolkit” to provide feedback at individual, group and organisational level.

### *Communities of practice and professional learning communities*

Communities of practice are everywhere and come in various forms and under various names in different organisations (Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015). One particular area of application of communities of practice, education, stands out for several reasons. First, in the field of education, “learning is not only a means to an end: it is the end product” (Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015, p. 5). As discussed above, knowledge and learning are being recognised as key assets for organisational survival and competitiveness in today’s dynamic world. Second, there is a significant body of literature, including original research, on successfully applied and sustained communities of practice in the field of education (Bolam et al., 2005), which is not always the case in other fields (Venters and Wood, 2007). Communities of practice in education-related organisations could thus serve as examples for other organisations, including the ICRC, which are just at the beginning of the process. Third, many of these education-related communities are relatively structured, which resonates with McDermott and Archibald’s (2010) recommendations for strategic management of communities of practice.

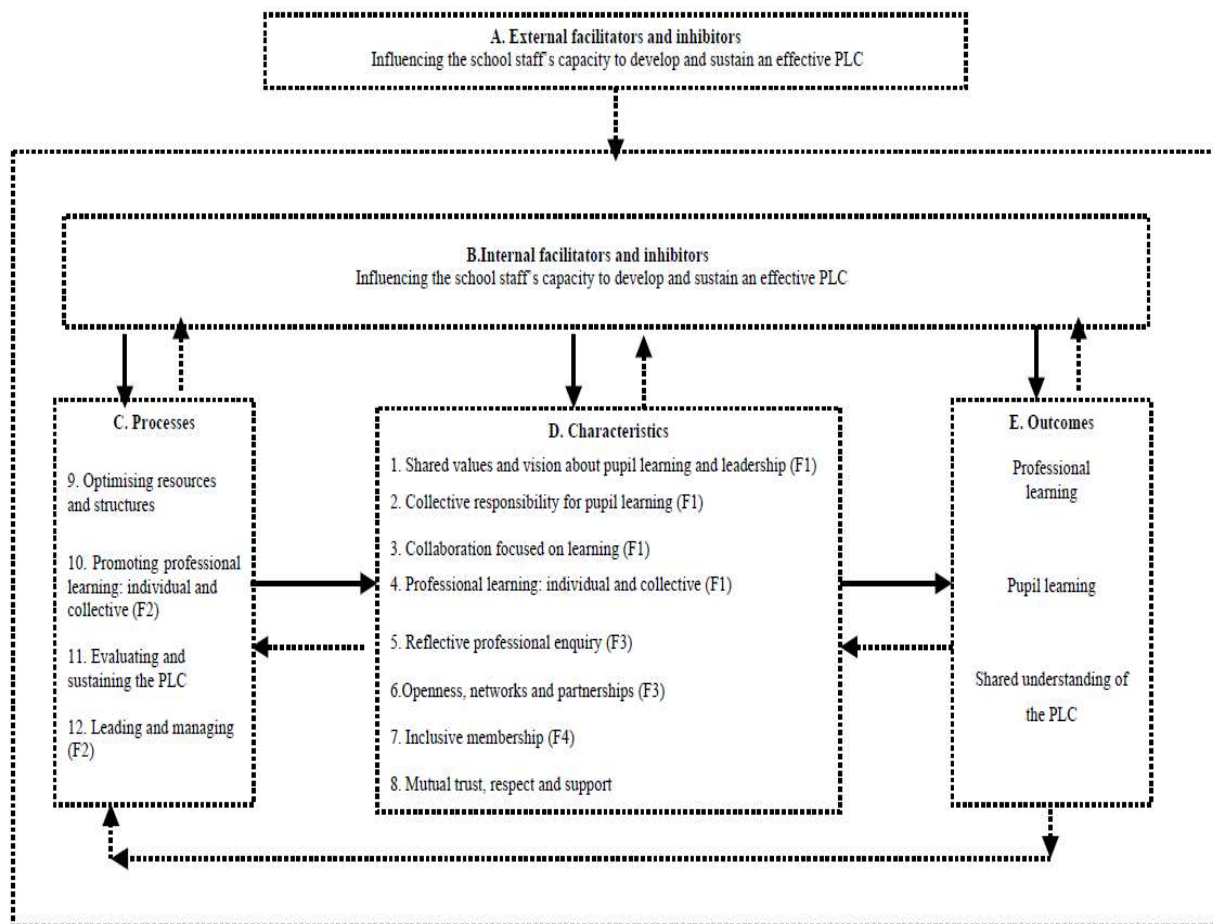
Communities of practice in educational organisations, including, but not limited to, schools, are often referred to as professional learning communities or professional communities of learners (Bolam et al., 2005). Some authors argue that there are distinctive differences between communities of practice and professional learning communities, especially in relation to membership, leadership and knowledge sharing (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). In a community of practice membership is

usually voluntary, leadership is more informal and often distributed, and knowledge is shared within the community and the networks created among the members. In contrast, in a professional learning community, membership is usually obligatory, leadership is more formal, and knowledge is shared within the whole school/organisation in an appropriate time and way (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). It is in the less formal overall structure of a community of practice that lies its biggest strength, especially in relation to the capture of tacit knowledge and knowledge creation. Nevertheless, professional learning communities seem to have been successfully applied and sustained in schools, bringing about improved professional and pupil learning (Bolam et al., 2005). This outcome of professional learning communities, if applied outside the field of schools, could be translated into improved individual, group and organisational learning.

Bolam et al. (2005) have defined an effective professional learning community as one which “has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals and other staff in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning” (Bolam et al., 2005, p.131).

Based on a comprehensive literature review on professional learning communities and studies of elements of professional learning communities in UK primary and secondary schools, Bolam et al. (2005) have proposed a model of a school operating as a professional learning community, Figure 10 (Bolam et al., 2005, p.152), and recommended the promotion of professional learning communities in the educational system in the UK.

Figure 10. Provisional Model of a School Operating as an Effective Professional Learning Community (Bolam et al., 2005, p.152).



The core of the model incorporates 12 dimensions, including eight characteristics and four main processes (Figure 10). The different elements of the framework mutually influence each other. The value of the eight characteristics of the model – shared values and vision, collective responsibility, collaboration focused on learning, professional learning, reflective professional enquiry, openness and networks, inclusive membership, mutual respect and support – have already been well discussed above. The four processes include optimising resources and structure, promoting professional learning, evaluation and leading and managing. The process of promoting professional learning has already been discussed in relation to the need of professionalisation of the work of humanitarian organisations, including the ICRC, and in the presentation of models of work-based learning. Similarly, the importance of evaluation of the work of the community was already discussed by Wenger,

McDermott and Snyder (2002). Tools are being developed for measuring the results of professional learning programmes in general and knowledge management in particular (Lupşa-Tătaru, Constantin and Doval, 2009; Lupşa-Tătaru, D. and Lupşa-Tătaru, F, 2013). The first and the fourth processes listed by Bolam et al. (2005), touch on important matters for the fostering of a learning community and have not yet been outlined in depth.

The first process, optimising resources and structures, alludes mainly to the importance of making time and space for learning (Bolam et al., 2005). Bolam et al. (2005, p.8), referring to Louis et al. (1995), point out that conversations among professionals on professional issues are a key indicator of a learning community, and that the employer should allow and provide for such conversations regularly. The second element, which should be provided for the work of a learning community is space. The space could be physical (Bolam et al., 2005) or virtual (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008), as already discussed.

Finally, the fourth process, leading and managing to promote the professional learning community, implies the active role of senior management and managers, who foster a learning culture, which will allow for the development and sustainability of professional learning communities (Bolam et al., 2005). Bolam et al. state that the development of a professional learning community requires the “active support of leadership at all levels”, involving “creating a learning culture”, “ensuring learning at all levels”, “promoting research and evaluation”, including “paying attention to the human side of change” (2005, pp. 15-16).

The importance of a “learning culture” in a school in case of a professional learning community, and in an organisation in general, is discussed by a number of authors. Fullan (1992), cited by Bolam et al. (2005, p.15), states that any school which fails to create a learning culture is “doomed to tinkering”. Fullan (2007) discusses also additional challenges for the implementation of a professional learning community. More specifically, the author states that not all policymakers and/or professionals actually support the development of learning communities, because it involves a major culture change: “make no mistake about it, transforming the *culture* of schools and the systems within



which they operate is the main point" (Fullan, 2007, p.152). Not everyone will be content with collaboration; some people may indeed prefer to act alone, and others, as discussed below, may suspect a hidden agenda. The process of "leading and managing to promote the professional learning community" (Bolam *et al.*, 2005, p. 143), thus gains in importance if collaboration is to be genuine. Leadership may also imply the acceptance and accommodation, at least to some degree, of dissenting voices. Similarly Schein (1985), also cited by Bolam *et al.* (2005, p.16), argues that "...the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture". Bolam *et al.* (2005, p.16) summarise that culture which enhances learning is one that "balances the interests of all stakeholders; focuses on people rather than systems; makes people believe they can change their environment; makes time for learning; takes a holistic approach to problems; encourages open communication; believes in teamwork; and has approachable leaders".

The core role of culture for learning has also been discussed outside the context of schools. Already Argyris (1976) had emphasised the importance of a supportive organisational culture for double loop learning and organisational learning as a whole. The leadership of an organisation has to be aware of the concept of knowledge management and how it can be integrated within the organisation (Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley, 2009), as knowledge is central for the functioning of organisations today (Higgins, 2006).

### *Communities of practice and complex adaptive systems*

A different approach from that of Activity Theory for understanding and explaining learning and knowledge creation in organisations can be seen in chaos and complexity theory (Higgins, 2006). Higgins sees the knowledge-creating organisation as a complex interaction of many agents, a "network of non-linear interactions" (2006, p.202). Knowledge is in the people and in the interaction between people with different knowledge in appropriate learning environments, with the willingness to share and the ability to understand each other (Higgins, 2006). Diversity is more stimulating and thus brings

more learning and better preparedness of organisations for the future. Conversely, less diversity will bring more stability in the short term, but less adaptability of the organisation in the long term (Higgins, 2006). Knowledge creation seems to be best suited for dynamic contexts, where change is frequent (Higgins, 2006). The diversity of humanitarian contexts thus provides rich grounds for knowledge creation. The knowledge-creating organisation, according to Higgins (2006), is the learning organisation, as defined by Senge (1990), with its expansive patterns of knowledge, and where people are continually learning to see the whole. Engeström's third generation of dynamically interacting activity systems, as well as Wenger's evolution of understanding of communities of practice, ultimately transforming into new structures, describe phenomena similar to the learning organisation.

In terms of Leontiev's activity hierarchy, the next level after the learning organisation could arguably be that of complex adaptive systems, i.e. self-organising work groups or teams. Indeed, some organisations have already been partially functioning this way for more than a decade (Ticoll, 2004). Thus communities of practice can be seen as having a dual function, on one hand as a knowledge management tool in organisations, and, on the other, as the possible base structure of the organisation itself, which could consist rather in a loose constellation of communities of practice, than in conventional hierarchies.

The concept of complex adaptive systems had started to be studied in relation to collective interactions in the last two to three decades. Complex adaptive systems have the capacity to learn (Stacey, 1996). Complex adaptive systems also have the capacity to change, in order to adapt to a changing environment, and the systems can change the environment as well (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006). Similarly, Jansen (2011) argues that organisations are not always rational, linear-functioning structures. Rather, organisations mimic biological systems with their ability to adapt to change and self-organise. Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006) propose twelve characteristics of complex adaptive entities (the authors preferred the term "entity" to "system"), closely associated with communities of practice. These characteristics include self-generation and re-generation; an element of "spirituality" or "passion"; they maintain themselves through continuous exchange with

other entities, which create new competences; they include participation in networks; being part of other structures; living in a dynamic process between order and chaos; transitions are usually nonlinear; and as a result small changes can bring about large effects; during phase transitions, they seek adaptation to the new context; there are forces, “attractors”, which limit growth; the complex adaptive entity can emerge in a new form; and, finally, it can dissipate, if it stops receiving energy from outside. In addition, Za, Spagnoletti and North-Samardzic (2014) point out that complex adaptive systems have a propensity for self-organisation, build their own hierarchies and structures for an optimal use of resources; and that learning and innovations emerge to meet environmental constraints and solve problems.

If a system is left on its own, without external energy (e.g. supportive leadership and committed management), it will sooner or later fall into disorder. Transitioning between “order” and “chaos”, depending on the specific time and context, seems to “provide the opportunity for organizational creativity and emergence” (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006, p.79). Thus, communities of practice, with adequate guidance, might indeed provide one of the most natural ways for learning and development.

Harris and Shelswell (2005, p. 173) conclude that the question is “...whether learning in a community of practice can become expansive, in the sense that genuinely new ways of thinking and acting are opened up for participants, or whether it is more often defensive, in that what is being learned is mostly supporting or reinforcing existing attitudes and strategies”, or a combination of both. Arguably any instrument could be misused or abused. If the underlying intention is not one of true collaboration, then neither communities of practice, nor learning organisations will work. But if these ideas are more than mere fillers for corporate mission statements, if the intent is real, then perhaps Senge’s vision and the concepts deriving from it truly are ideals worth aiming for.

#### *2.4.2. Communities of practice in international humanitarian organisations: systematic literature review*

This systematic literature review was conducted by searching four subject-relevant research databases, using the EBSCOhost online reference system, including Business Source Complete, the British Education Index, the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and Education Abstracts (H.W. Wilson). The search included peer reviewed original studies published in English until November 2017. Search terms used for informal collaborative learning included workplace learning, work-based learning, informal learning, communities of inquiry, professional learning communities, learning communities, expansive learning, knowledge management, learning organisation, e-learning, and communities of practice. To give a broader picture and because of the scarcity of the literature on communities of practice in international humanitarian organisations, searches were run with these terms in relation to humanitarian, nongovernmental, not-for-profit and volunteer organisations.

With these broad search terms applied, thousands of papers came up. Of these, only 46 were shortlisted for further study, based on title and abstract content relevance. Twenty-three of these papers are original studies and are discussed in the systematic literature review.

Several major themes emerged from the articles that were included in the systematic literature review. Some articles had more than one major theme under discussion. More specifically, the studies can be broadly grouped under the following ten themes:

- 1) The role of organisational culture to support communities of practice as a knowledge management tool: Guldberg et al. (2013); McHargue (2003).
- 2) Individual and organisational benefits from participation in a community of practice and evaluation of the work of communities of practice: Agranoff (2008); Corfield, Paton, and Little (2013); Hume, C. and Hume, M. (2015); Lupşa-Tătaru, D. and Lupşa-Tătaru, F. (2013); Neufeld, Fang and Wan (2013).

- 3) Personal characteristics and role of managers for the work of communities of practice: Beattie (2006); Doornbos, Simons and Denessen (2008); Lassila, Mäntylä and Kantola (2007); Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou (2017); Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008).
- 4) Tools for experiential learning: Holtham and Rich (2012); Shields, Wideman and Coupal (2013).
- 5) Role of context: Mano (2010); Verkoren(2010).
- 6) Networking: Agranoff (2008); Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins (1999); Verkoren(2010).
- 7) Research and partnership with academia: Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins (1999); Russel et al. (2011); Verkoren(2010).
- 8) Trust: Hume and Hume (2015); Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins (1999); Visser et al. (2017).
- 9) ICT: Guldberg et al. (2013); Venters and Wood, (2007); Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008; Russel et al. (2011).
- 10) Cultivation of a community of practice: Jansen, Cammock and Conner (2010); Russel et al. (2011); Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006); Venters and Wood, (2007); Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008).

*The role of organisational culture to support communities of practice as a knowledge management tool*

Guldberg et al. (2013) conducted a prospective study in Scottish Autism, a not-for-profit organisation, assessing the role of communities of practice for improving individual and organisational learning, by applying Wenger et al.'s value creation framework (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). One of the main findings was that Scottish Autism had tried to mitigate the top-down structure of the vertical hierarchy by introducing organisational structures such as a knowledge management forum. This undertaking had started with a forum for sharing and identifying knowledge gaps and appointing a researcher in residence. The priority of the organisation was to provide "ways" for sharing knowledge. It was accepted that experience and practice were enhanced through networks and communities, depending on participation. "A community of practice could bring together users with different training and learning issues" (pp. 113-122), especially when blended with modern ICT. It

could be an excellent source of context-based experience and best practices. Additionally, the study recommended to aim at capturing formal or informal conversations, as well as developing a story telling culture. Resources should be accessible and visible across the organisation, with need of more published output. The study found that working together in small groups, through wiki when necessary, capturing the knowledge of key individuals within the organisation, led to the natural development of communities of practice and facilitated complementing communication on vertical, horizontal and transversal levels. The process also allowed for sharing tacit and explicit knowledge and supporting staff enthusiasm and initiative. Communities of practice have also been found to be the fastest way of sharing knowledge and introducing new staff to the job among Australian and New Zealand expatriate volunteers by Fee and Gray (2011).

McHargue (2003) argued that the not-for-profit culture of an organisation could help it in becoming a learning organisation. The author administered an adapted questionnaire to assess the relationship between dimensions of a learning organisation and knowledge, finance and mission performance in a random sample of 617 US-based operational not-for-profit organisations. All learning dimensions under study (strategic leadership, context, collective vision, a system for capturing and sharing knowledge, collaboration and team work, inquiry and dialogue, as well as continuous learning) were significantly related to mission performance. Financial and knowledge performance were most strongly associated with creating systems for capturing and sharing knowledge in an environment conducive to learning, while mission performance was most strongly associated with continuous learning. The study found that the number of volunteers added financial value to the organisation. Having more employees and “giving workers the time and money to learn supports a learning environment”, which is “important for the creation of a learning organization” (McHargue, 2003, p. 200-201). The study concluded that human resource development should be the focus of not-for-profit-organisations. In this regard, although not part of the systematic review, a reference can be made to Stahl (2013), who suggested that opportunities for learning and development are a major incentive for employees in the not-for-profit sector, especially as employees’

salaries in the not-for-profit sector are usually below average market conditions. Investing money not only in service to clients or beneficiaries, but also in staff learning and in adequate technologies, and encouraging collaboration within and outside the organisation should be integrated with organisational work.

*Individual and organisational benefits from participation in a community of practice and evaluation of the work of communities of practice*

Agranoff (2008) focused on the importance of collaboration beyond the boundaries of one organisation. The study was conducted among administrators and programme specialists in 14 intergovernmental networks. The networks, according to Agranoff (2008), demonstrated the kind of supportive structures needed for shared thinking and shared information. Based on these network connections, collaborative communities of practice were created among specialists from different organisations. As a result, there were four positive outcomes. The first included personal benefits, such as personal interest, knowledge gain, interdisciplinary knowledge gain, exposure to different organisational cultures, engaging in further networking and ultimately shaping one's role in the organisation. Second came organisational benefits, such as increased access to information, resources and expertise, enhanced flexibility and collaborative management of uncertainty among others. Third, the author listed network process benefits such as improved inter-organisational connectivity and thus further collaboration, multiagency problem solving, enhanced knowledge of those participating in the network, the exchange of tacit knowledge, the exchange of resources, and working together towards finding solutions. Finally, as fourth positive outcome, Agranoff highlighted tangible network benefits, including new enhanced knowledge for the network, access to resources, revised plans and programmes. The study recommended managers to "understand the integrative nature of communities of practice when approaching the most difficult of problems" (Agranoff, 2008, p.344). "This requires investment, exploration, discussion, testing, compromise, and all the other elements of co-practice or interdisciplinary/interagency integration by exploration" (Agranoff, 2008, p.344).

The importance of personal benefits for participation in a community of practice is supported by several authors in this literature review. Neufeld, Fang and Wan (2013) started with the assumption that an individual's commitment to a community of practice required the perspective of a clear individual outcome. In their study, this outcome was linked to individual learning. It was hypothesised that the three initial dimensions of a community of practice, i.e. shared repertoire, joint enterprise and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998), would be positively associated with individual learning. The study design included a survey, initially tested among Canadian graduate PhD students, followed by a survey and interviews among 59 employees of a not-for-profit organisation. Corroborating Wenger's results, study participants who had reported experiencing shared repertoire, joint enterprise and mutual engagement, also reported higher learning outcomes, which could be applied to their job. Of the three dimensions, joint enterprise, related to the sense of belonging to a community, showed the strongest association with individual learning in both study groups. In addition, most participants did not see the organisation as a whole to be a community of practice. Rather, the community of practice was developed among a small group of people inside the organisation, as well as among a larger group from outside the organisation.

Hume and Hume (2015) studied the relationship between internal marketing and knowledge management in not-for-profit Australian organisations by interviewing (n=32) and/or surveying (n=179) managers and senior full-time and volunteer staff. Hume and Hume (2015, p.29) used Ahmed and Rafiq's (2004) definition of internal marketing: "a planned effort using marketing-like approach directed at motivating employees for implementing and integrating organisational strategies towards customer orientation", aiming to test whether internal marketing can be used to promote knowledge management in not-for-profit organisations. In addition, the authors looked at whether socialisation strategies, including communities of practice, presented an improvement for the internal marketing of knowledge management. Many of the respondents were somewhat "at odds" with internal marketing being applied to their organisations, because of a possible diversion of resources from core activities as well as the promotion of individuals or groups as being more successful than others. On



the other hand, the research did find that different socialisation strategies were very effective channels for knowledge capture, distribution and renewal, as well as for staff engagement at the professional and/or organisational levels to “build trust, personal relevance, and satisfaction to support and drive knowledge” (Hume and Hume, 2015, p.42). Although knowledge management was well acknowledged as being a valuable activity, it was seen as a low priority in most of the organisations that had been included in the study. This was mainly due to the strong operational focus on service delivery of not-for-profit employees. Knowledge was seen as being centred in individuals and “knowledge capture was ad hoc or opportunistic at best” (Hume and Hume, 2015, p.32). However, the authors concluded, knowledge management did not have to be complex, nor did it require large investments in ICT, as knowledge begins with people. The authors found that knowledge management became sustainable as long as appropriate approaches were adopted both at the individual, bottom up, level and at the organisational, top down, level, with topics relevant to participants.

So, “Does knowledge management work in NGOs?” Corfield, Paton, and Little (2013) ask in the title of their study. Key personnel in three UK-based and internationally operating non-governmental organisations were interviewed to address this question. All three organisations were considered leaders in knowledge management, each of them having a knowledge management programme and a knowledge manager. The use of ICT, including intranets and the creation of “knowledge bases” was central in each of the three cases. Although the programmes were overall highly valued by staff, immediate benefits were less evident. The authors concluded that knowledge management programmes for non-governmental organisations should be customised and planned for the long term in order to accrue benefit. Additionally, the study pointed out that, although knowledge management was recognised as an asset for the organisations, there was no formal evaluation process to measure success. The importance of developing more standardised, quantitative, instruments for knowledge management evaluation was also discussed by Lupşa-Tătaru, D. and Lupşa-Tătaru, F. (2013). Lupşa-Tătaru and Lupşa-Tătaru (2013) chose, among others, the McKinsey model for evaluating knowledge-management system implementation. The model considers seven elements of

organisations. These elements include three “hard” ones, i.e. strategy, structure and system, and four “soft” ones, determined mainly by the people in an organisation – staff, style, skills, and shared values. The European Committee for Standardization, based on the McKinsey model, has developed a questionnaire for assessing the efficiency of implementing a knowledge management process in organisations. The authors applied this model to profit and not-for-profit organisations and concluded that it is a good tool for following the development of knowledge management processes in organisations (Lupşa-Tătaru, Constantin and Doval, 2009; Lupşa-Tătaru and Lupşa-Tătaru 2013).

### *Personal characteristics and role of managers for the work of communities of practice*

Lassila, Mäntylä and Kantola (2007) found that personal characteristics, including the willingness to try something new, to take up challenges, and curiosity, were the main driving forces for people to become members of a community of practice.

Doornbos, Simons and Denessen (2008) also looked into personal characteristics and their relation to informal collaborative workplace learning in a cohort of executive Dutch police officers. The study found that positive individual attitudes to learning, feedback from colleagues, and the possibility of constructive criticism and reflection, as well as the participation in professional or social networks, were positively associated with workplace learning. However, a perceived high level of personal competence was negatively associated with collaborative learning and with learning from experts, and vice versa. The authors recommended on one hand the encouragement of learning for more experienced employees by building on their past experience, and, on the other, to use this experience to contribute to the learning of others and of the organisation as a whole.

Beattie (2006) and Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou (2017) studied the role of line-managers in learning in the workplace. Beattie (2006) conducted case study research in two voluntary organisations, which provided a range of social care services in Scotland. Beattie (2006) concluded that line managers played a critical role in facilitating individual and organisational learning. The study looked into managers’ behaviours as well, and presented a hierarchy of facilitative behaviours. Being

caring, informing and professional were at the bottom of the hierarchy, and practised by most managers. More demanding behaviours, including being empowering and challenging were at the top of the managers' behaviours hierarchy, and less frequently observed, requiring time to be developed. With the managers maturing as facilitators, they could use different methods, depending on the context. Corroborating Guldberg et al. (2013), McHargue (2003) and Beattie (2006) found that, in both organisations, there were strategic policies in support of an organisational learning culture, where learning is shared and continuous, aiming at quality, sustained improvement, with the ultimate goal of becoming learning organisations. The most important element in the learning system of these organisations, the study showed, was supervision, "providing a pivotal link between individuals and their manager, and between individuals and the organization as a whole" (Beattie, 2006, p. 116).

Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou (2017) assessed behavioural leadership approaches in relation to learning and creativity, specifically in humanitarian organisations. They conducted an online survey among 137 humanitarian workers from 59 organisations, based mainly in Asia and Africa. The study looked at the "boundary spanning behaviour", referring to the equal sharing of information with the whole team, including expatriates and locals; and at the "prototypicality" of the leader, referring to the leader's integration in the team, including sharing group norms and symbols, work jargon, participation in after work activities, and collaboration. The study found a positive association between the extent to which leaders engage in boundary spanning with more intergroup collaboration and, by extension, higher field learning and creativity. "By having frequent and equal interactions with locals and expatriates, the leaders seemed to foster better collaborative relations between the two groups in general. This, in turn, allowed humanitarian workers to partake in each other's knowledge and experience, thus facilitating the translation of experiential lessons into operations", (Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2017, p.10). Similar to Beattie (2006), Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou (2017) restated the crucial role of field office leaders for outcomes in humanitarian organisations. The authors argued that learning and creativity, especially in dynamic

humanitarian contexts, went beyond formal manuals and workshops, and were concentrated within and among employees, working and talking together.

### *Tools for experiential learning*

Several smaller studies looked into specific tools, related to experiential learning, which can be used in a community of practice or for informal collaborative learning in general. For instance, the study of Shields, Wideman and Coupal (2013), in a Canadian educational standards agency, supported action research in a community of learners to facilitate organisational learning. The authors also argued that action research is more difficult to be used in a top-down organisation. Holtham and Rich (2012), with a limited budget, used fiction for complementary informal management learning. An online “soap opera” was created, with the act taking place in a fictitious town. Characters faced difficult practical real-life situations, which could be encountered in the voluntary sector. Participants (organisational managers) could thus relate to the characters. Following each episode, a discussion was encouraged, to determine the future directions of the story. This activity was supported by senior managers with creative skills and rich professional backgrounds, who were ready to share their experience with colleagues in a narrative way through storytelling.

### *Role of context, networking and partnership with academia, and trust*

Mano (2010) looked into double-loop learning in crisis situations. A questionnaire on crisis control and crisis prevention was administered to 225 managers from non-governmental organisations in Israel, working in crisis contexts. The results showed learning from past experience significantly and positively enhanced managers’ ability for crisis control. However, somewhat surprisingly for the author, it lowered their forecasting ability for crisis prevention. The study concluded that it might not always be possible to control situations that generate crises. On the other hand, though not part of this systematic review, Neagu (2013) argued that knowledge management is context-independent, in contrast to organisational learning, somewhat corroborating Wenger,

Trayner and de Laat's (2011) value creation framework of communities and networks. Organisational learning provides a purpose for the use of knowledge. The application of knowledge has to be adapted to each specific context (Neagu, 2013).

Verkoren (2010) had similar findings about the importance of experiential learning and networking, when 76 staff members were interviewed in local nongovernmental peace organisations in Asia and Africa. The study referred to these local nongovernmental organisations as "Southern", as opposed to "Northern" nongovernmental organisations from more developed countries in Europe, North America and from Australia. Learning in the organisations under study was mainly from experience and interaction with others in the field. The importance of local expertise, spending time with beneficiaries in their communities and the knowledge of the beneficiaries as a whole was considered an important source of knowledge, helping to make programmes more relevant. Gaining tacit knowledge was important for the fast-changing contexts in which these organisations worked. Structured courses were appreciated, although the gained knowledge had to be adapted to specific circumstances. Self-directed e-learning was not common, because of lack of time and the difficulty to sift through relevant information. Networks with other local nongovernmental organisations seemed very important for the exchange of knowledge and figured as "very prominent forums for sharing and refining knowledge" (Verkoren, 2010, p.801). Developing networks was also seen as a strategy for peacebuilding. On the other hand, these learning opportunities could be impeded by competition and distrust among local organisations. Partnership with "Northern" nongovernmental organisations was not on an equal basis and "Southern" organisations were not involved in strategic discussions. Only about 10% of the organisations under study were involved in research activities, mainly because of a lack of time, skills and funding. The study concluded on the importance of documenting local knowledge, which could strengthen the role of these organisations in international debates and policymaking, as well as contribute to global knowledge exchange and advocacy. Verkoren (2010) suggested that a possible way of doing this could be through closer cooperation with research institutes and universities.

The role of partnerships for becoming a learning organisation was discussed by Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins (1999). The context of the study was Oxfam America, an international humanitarian organisation. A defining characteristic of the organisation was partnership, based on trust and mutual understanding, with local (Southern) organisations, supported by Oxfam America, as well as with “Northern” organisations. “Southern” partners should be the leaders of development in their national contexts, with Oxfam America focusing on funding and capacity building, networking and collaboration. However, to respond to today’s dynamic context, the organisation needed to be flexible and knowledge creating through somehow mirroring the multinational corporations of the for-profit sector. In order to achieve this, the organisation had developed partnerships with leading universities and research centres, including the Harvard Business School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, sharing experience and benefiting from pro bono consultancy. It had also created partnerships with strategic “Northern” organisations that had common programme interests. Modern ICT made all partnerships, collaborative activities and network relations feasible. The authors, however, cautioned that increasing collaboration might create a certain level of tension, by threatening the sense of autonomy. In addition, a new organisational culture, entrepreneurial and innovative, embracing diversity and the participation of frontline staff in strategic planning, was adopted. Examples of organisational learning were identified, recorded and documented in the form of case studies. Evaluation and monitoring were integrated into strategic planning. Trust was seen as an essential element for effective performance of the team and the learning organisation in general. Visser et al. (2016) found that when there was trust in management, high levels of autonomy were positively associated with work-life balance satisfaction among expatriate staff in another large international humanitarian organisation, Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières, MSF).

### *Cultivation of a community of practice*

Only five of the articles that were included in the systematic literature review elaborated on the process of “cultivation” of a community of practice or learning community. One of the

communities was evaluated as a failure (Venters and Wood, 2007), while the other four were considered successful (Jansen, Cammock and Conner, 2010; Russel et al., 2011; Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008).

Venters and Wood (2007) presented the case of the British Council's internet-based knowledge management system, and an attempt to introduce "CD:net", a community of practice among the organisation's Country Directors (CD), spanning the 110 countries in which the British Council operated. Data was gathered through interviews, attendance of meetings and document reviews. The knowledge management strategy comprised three stages: the first aim was to make the most of a new technology infrastructure, in which the organisation had invested heavily; the second stage involved implementing a knowledge sharing programme, supporting current organisational goals; and the third stage consisted in a knowledge management and learning strategy, whose aim was the transformation of the organisation into a learning organisation with innovation and knowledge management at its core. The "cultivation" of the community of practice was part of the second stage, and was based on Wenger's seven principles, as already discussed. The knowledge management team had the right to encourage, but not order, the development of the community of practice. "Prior to its launch CD:net had been strongly supported by the Country Directors but after its launch it was only used for a couple of months and then participation dropped until the system was forgotten" (Venters and Wood, 2007, p. 356). Some of the immediate reasons proposed to explain this failure were related to the lack of a culture of knowledge sharing; to concerns about who could read messages if shared electronically; and to a lack of adequate technological support, mainly related to private internet availability and internet speeds in some countries of operation. On the other hand, the authors argue, in the not too distant past, technologies were even less advanced, such as telex and fax machines, which was not an impediment for communication or a sense of community. In addition, some country directors were ready to participate in other technology-dependent discussion groups, thus overcoming technological weaknesses, but were not willing to use the imposed forum for experience sharing.

An in-depth analysis of the data related the failure of CD:net to three major factors. First, the initiation of CD:net happened at a time of global downsizing of the British Council. This led to personal insecurity among employees, lack of trust and loyalty towards the organisation, and thus potentiated the formation of “underground movements” through the CD:net initiative. The article argued that individual self-fulfilment and achievement had become a very powerful trend. “Attempts at creating social cohesion must start from recognition of individualism, diversity and scepticism” (Venters and Wood, 2007, p. 362). Second, the attempt to create a community of practice among country directors reduced the role of “headquarters” in providing social coherence and shared repertoire, which are seen as essential factors for cultivating a successful community of practice. CD:net challenged the centralised nature of the organisation. The centralised nature of the British Council stemmed from its historical role to project influence of the United Kingdom abroad. However, the authors argued, today’s cultural diplomacy is rather based on mutual understanding and shared experience, requiring less centralised structures. Third, reflecting the previous point, many country directors worked more closely with various organisations based in their country of posting, than with headquarters. They participated in a wide range of discussions and meetings, including communities of practice, which supported their work, rather than in what was imposed by headquarters. “As these communities of practice might naturally expand beyond the organizational boundary this might also challenge the very nature of the organization itself” (Venters and Wood, 2007, p. 364). The authors concluded that, in spite of the outcome of this particular instance, the development of communities of practice should be encouraged, and at the same time managed strategically (McDermott and Archibald, 2010; Venters and Wood, 2007).

Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006) studied documents and interviewed key leaders in three small organisations – an organisation for nursing leaders, a self-development practice of the Mussar Jewish faith, and an urban co-housing community, in all of which communities of practice were started. Each of the three communities of practice was started small, by only a few people, who gradually moved aside to make space for newcomers. There was minimal “structure”, which evolved



with community growth. Each participant had a chance to be a leader of the community, “when they are in the best position to contribute” (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006, p.89). As already discussed earlier in this chapter, Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006) linked communities of practice to complex adaptive “entities” and identified several characteristics. The authors concluded that, although these three communities of practice were very successful, it would be difficult to sustain connections and passion over time with the growth of the community, and that further research was needed to understand the “death” or transition of a community of practice.

Jansen, Cammock and Conner (2010) reported on how a professional learning community, outside a school setting, was built among 25 managers of adolescent-focused nongovernmental organisations in New Zealand, with the purpose of building leadership capacity. The principles of appreciative inquiry were applied, highlighting a positive focus on individual and collective reflection. Eschewing the principles of adult learning theory, which also recognise the importance of sharing mistakes, Jansen, Cammock and Conner (2010) argued that asking appreciative questions and focusing on positive stories would inspire participants and free them from giving politically correct answers. Having substantial amounts of time at one’s disposal was another vital factor which allowed for the development of a collaborative learning environment, as was establishing a more informal and self-directed structure. Similarly to Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006), in a later article, not included in this systematic review but elaborating further on the study described by Jansen, Cammock and Conner (2010), Jansen (2011) linked appreciative professional learning with complex adaptive systems. Complexity can be seen as rooted in diversity. Jansen (2011) argued for balancing coherence and randomness in terms of structure, and diversity and redundancy in terms of community participants for a successful learning community. Among community participants, all-inclusiveness was applied. However, there were selection criteria for the participants of the community: all had to be managers in different adolescent-focused non-governmental organisations. This, according to the author, created a sense of connection and support. Last, but not least, the importance of a perceived personal benefit from participating in the community, was again underlined: “...I have benefited so

much from having this opportunity to meet spending this time focussed not on my organisation, but on me and what makes me an effective leader” the authors report a participant reflecting, and showing an overall feeling of freedom, creativity and collective ownership (Jansen, Cammock and Conner, 2010, p.47).

In a case study, Russel et al. (2011) presented the knowledge management activities for building a global virtual community of practice for the India, China and America (ICA) Institute, a not-for-profit platform to support development in these three regions. The authors noted that all activities were relatively inexpensive. The organisation had a traditional top-down structure. However, its leaders understood that the locus of knowledge was within a community of people. Building on this, the organisation’s leadership looked for further opportunities of collaboration with other communities. Important personal qualities for knowledge creation were personal motivation, and passion for research and for the work of the organisation. The use of modern ICT was central, as in the other studies discussed here. The main approaches involved, first, web conferencing, including online meetings and sharing documents, as well as virtual seminars and presentations, questions and answers in real time by experts, and roundtable discussions with the sharing of personal experience; second, online research and the launch of a publicly accessible journal; third, keeping all members up to date through an e-mail newsletter, the use of social networks such as LinkedIn to support community formation; and fourth, a data mining tool, such as Google analytics, which was used to provide targeted information to users based on their geographical location, and Google search sites of their interest. In addition, facilitation strategies were put in place to ensure the continuity of the active knowledge creating community.

Further, Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) outlined in a reflective case study the consecutive steps on how an inter-organisational learning community on e-collaboration was started and developed over the years. The community was started by two passionate facilitator-practitioners. First, the facilitators asked the leadership of their organisations for support. When they met a group of people working in developmental organisations in the Netherlands who were interested in the idea,

a core group, called “design group” for this community, was formed. The facilitators started to stimulate dialogue and create connections through online discussions and face-to-face meetings. The facilitators made an effort to encourage the participants to post, by actively asking questions. During meetings, participants were asked for topics of interest for future discussions. It was felt that some participants did not post answers, as they were concerned with the quality of their potential posts. The term “community of practice” was not mentioned to participants. At the beginning, there was a low number of responses online. An e-coaching session was organised, to create a common experience. In addition, an intern was recruited to encourage people to reflect on their own practice, thus stimulating online collaboration and knowledge sharing. The facilitators found that they could influence people’s involvement by inviting them for specific contributions, ‘seducing’ them to share experiences, or ask them to take a specific role in an activity in the community. Private (private conversations, private collaborative projects) and public (online group discussions, quarterly face-to-face meetings, research interviews) learning spaces were created. Private spaces were more important in the earlier stages of community life. Meetings were hosted on a rotational basis, in order to create a feeling of ownership and to reduce the logistical burden. Approximately 20 people attended each meeting, of which about half were new and half were from previous meetings. Over a period of two years the number of community members grew from two to about 100. Research activities and a web blog were started as well. The article quoted one participant as saying: “I mostly appreciate the inspiration it gives me to try new things...” (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008, p.24).

About one year after the start of the community, an external expert on communities of practice was invited, to evaluate the first year of growth and define a future course for development. The opinion of members of the community on the topic of inviting in an expert was also sought. After another year, the two facilitators stopped their involvement in the community, because they changed jobs. Leadership was handed over, and people from other organisations became members. Connections with other communities were made and the community moved on to a new stage.

The article then proposed 11 principles for guiding a learning community, inspired by the community of practice concept. These principles included the use of a learning facilitator-practitioner – the advantages and disadvantages of a general facilitator vs. a facilitator-practitioner have already been discussed earlier in Chapter 2. Co-facilitators should also be used, as the facilitation of a community of practice is a demanding “24-hour job” (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008, p.26). In addition, the need for co-facilitation is motivated by the need for different competences from the facilitators, especially during the different stages in the life of a community. Learning should be applied in actual practice, as in Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Further, self-organisation should be stimulated by providing less planning, and favouring the creation of free opportunistic spaces, and creative ways should be sought to facilitate conversations in private and public spaces.

The authors also recommended that the diversity in a community be used, including the various backgrounds of participants and their levels of participation, as this stimulates innovation and creativity. Creating membership criteria can be limiting. This had been well demonstrated by the Venters and Wood (2007) study, where membership was limited to country directors of the British Council, a fact which contributed to the failure of the community. If new members found value in the community of practice, they would be more likely to move to the core group. Online communities may have a different, passive type of members, who do not participate in the discussion. Even so, Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) argued, these members may still influence the discussion. For instance, active members might write differently, if they know that more people are reading the discussion or blog. Further research is necessary regarding these passive members, as well as whether they would be more active, if different tools of communication were used. The exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge in the community should be encouraged and balanced. “Making knowledge explicit is a very valuable learning and reflection process” (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008, p.28). Further, there should be guided meta-level reflections. There should be a distinction between individual and collaborative learning and practice. Both processes could develop simultaneously over time. Communities need cultivation, leadership support and the involvement of managers, so that the

community can apply its expertise. Team leaders are usually seen as expert practitioners. Managers should be truly involved, yet not controlling (McDermott and Archibald, 2010). Finally, the boundaries of the communities should be managed. As demonstrated in this literature review, communities are often inter-organisational, and may overlap with other communities. This seems to be a natural evolution of a community of practice, especially thanks to the internet, connecting people with the same interests, creating space for the free exploration of topics, and overcoming potential competition among professionals from the same organisation. Stories in different organisations are specific, and at the same time similar. This could be used for creating a synergy in the work of different communities, a constellation of communities (Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015), each contributing to a specific area of interest for the organisation.

In summary, the research in only six of the 23 studies included in the systematic literature review had been conducted in international humanitarian organisations. A further five articles discussed the cultivation of communities of practice or learning communities. In this systematic literature review, no study was found directly researching the start and development of a community of practice or other related forms of informal collaborative learning in an international humanitarian organisation.

## 2.5. Conclusion and answer to research question 1

The first research question asked how informal collaborative learning can be conceptualised as a tool for work-based learning in international humanitarian organisations.

The concept of communities of practice has been explored as an informal collaborative tool for knowledge creation and thus organisational learning. A systematic literature review on informal learning in international humanitarian organisations has shown that cultivating a successful community of practice requires intense commitment, starting with supportive leadership, including from the organisation's top management tier. The role of the facilitator and/or manager is critical, as

is the role of the members of the community, who, depending on the context, can become community leaders themselves. An organisation, which has more diverse employees with different experiences, and which gives them time and other resources to learn, will be learning more. Communication across organisational boundaries is another key element, requiring investment in appropriate modern technologies. Because modern ICT makes it possible, communities and/or networks are being formed today not only within the organisation, but also outside the scope of the organisation. Some see this as a possible threat to the authenticity and identity of an organisation, others rather see possibilities for synergy in the work of different communities. Investing in research and cooperation with universities could be an additional stimulus for learning and development. A community of practice has to start small with a few motivated, professional and passionate people. Seeing the personal benefits from participating in the community, including knowledge gained, empowerment, and positioning in the organisation, and building on interpersonal trust and support, new members will join, while others will leave. The organisation will benefit and learn from supporting experiential learning, capturing tacit knowledge and turning it into explicit knowledge, sharing it and then applying it adapted to a new context. The community might become too large and difficult to sustain. It will change as a result, and a new one will be formed.

Learning, new knowledge and collaboration are key factors for the survival and competitiveness of organisations. Through a literature review, it was argued that communities of practice, supported by modern ICT, are at the centre of knowledge creation in an organisation. International humanitarian organisations appear to have all the characteristics of being or becoming knowledge-creating learning organisations (Neagu, 2013). International humanitarian organisations work in diverse and dynamically changing contexts, with diverse and dynamically changing human capital. However, the creation of a unique body of knowledge, which could be shared and continuously developed, and which leads to the learning organisation and vice versa, seems still to be a challenge for these organisations (Neagu, 2013). As already stated, the overall objective of this thesis is to study and foster informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations in general, and

in the ICRC in particular, to promote individual and organisational learning and development. To elaborate further on the scientific rationale of this study, as discussed in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 has shown that communities of practice are everywhere and take various forms and names. A customised adaptation to each specific context and organisation is essential for cultivating successful knowledge sharing and creating communities of practice.

In sum, the conceptual framework for this study looks at the promotion of informal collaborative learning and, ultimately, knowledge creation in international humanitarian organisations through work-based learning tools such as communities of practice.

The required contextual approach, the scarce literature on informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations, and the essential role of human learning and knowledge in international humanitarian organisations, calls for an empirical baseline assessment of how informal collaborative learning is perceived among ICRC employees. Data from this assessment, aligned with the literature review, will serve the purpose of offering recommendations to foster more informal collaborative types of learning in the ICRC, complementing the more formal ones.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

The chapter details the methodology used to conduct the empirical assessment on how ICRC employees perceive the significance of, and opportunities for, informal collaborative learning in the organisation. The chapter addresses research design, sampling and ethical considerations. This is followed by an outline of study procedures, design of data collection instruments and methods applied for data analysis. Finally, limitations of the study, defining reliability and validity issues in relation to the research design and the data collection instruments, are discussed.

### 3.1. Study design

A cross-sectional mixed methods study design was selected for conducting the study. Integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods allows for better reflection of diverse, multi-layered social reality (Creswell, 2012; Feilzer, 2010). Mixed methods study design is often associated with pragmatism as a philosophy and as a research paradigm (Feilzer, 2010; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). In contrast, the other main research paradigms, such as positivism/postpositivism and constructivism/interpretivism, are usually associated with particular research methods. In a simplified way – positivists focus on one reality, existing independently of our understanding; constructivists focus on the subjectivity of reality, created by our understanding of it (Creswell, 2012; Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2014). A positivist approach usually favours quantitative methods, while constructivist approaches often employ qualitative methods.

At the ontological level, pragmatists do not offer a “theory of truth” (Howe, 1988). Pragmatist approaches dispense with attempts at eliciting truth in favour of building knowledge on human experience, reflection, and on what has “worked in practice”. Pragmatism is closely related to the works of James, Peirce and Dewey (Morgan, 2014). As already noted earlier, Dewey’s understanding of knowledge is based in the concept of inquiry. The philosophy of pragmatism accepts that there is



more than one reality. Through inquiry, beliefs can be tested in action and practical solutions found to real life problems (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatists support an alternative philosophical framework, based on inclusiveness, and within which multiple assumptions and diverse methods can be accommodated (Greene, Kreider and Mayer, 2005). Morgan (2014, p.1049) argues that pragmatism can be seen as a new alternative approach to research, “as a form of social action, rather than an abstract philosophical system”. For pragmatism, abstraction is replaced with experience, based on continuous interaction between beliefs and actions. Morgan (2014, p.1049) points out that pragmatists are interested not only in the way knowledge is acquired, but also “to produce one kind of knowledge rather than another [...] the purpose we pursue”, to produce knowledge. Ethics has an essential role in pragmatist philosophy (Mertens, 2010).

The concept of communities of practice, the focus of this study, is largely grounded in pragmatist philosophy. In addition, a pragmatist research paradigm is appropriate when studying experiences of people, as this is at the core of pragmatist philosophy. The second research question aimed at studying the experience of ICRC managers with informal collaborative learning in the organisation. In addition, as already discussed, learning by doing is an important mode of learning in humanitarian organisations (Edwards, 1997).

Pragmatism is not normally associated with a particular method and could use one or another or a combination thereof. As noted, this study uses mixed methods. More specifically, it has a multilevel sequential mixed design (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Information gathered through each of the methods is used to supplement the next method. The different research methods, quantitative and qualitative, will collect different types of data. Quantitative methods are more associated with collecting deductive data, while the qualitative assessment is associated with rich inductive data. Blending the two will allow for a better overview and can help in building on initial findings and generating new concepts (Feilzer, 2010; Patton, 1990). The mixed methods approach allows for a more creative adaptation of the research to a specific setting, capturing as much real-life data as possible

(Patton, 1990). While a qualitative study could be coded quantitatively for statistical purposes, the reverse is more difficult (Patton, 1990).

A cross-sectional type of study allows for assessing multiple variables in more than one participant, and possible differences between groups, at the same point in time in one study (Bryman, 2008). This is not without limitations. However, for the purpose of addressing the second research question, in an exploratory study, with limited resources, this type of study design was suitable and allowed for the collection of the necessary data. An additional reason for selecting a cross-sectional study design vs. a longitudinal one, was to avoid study fatigue among respondents. This may well have occurred, had the respondents been subjected to additional procedures, considering the ever-increasing quantity of questionnaires and other requests for participation in surveys and other opinion research in the organisation.

In summary, using a cross-sectional mixed method approach in this study allowed for the collection of data on the experience of ICRC managers with regard to their participation in informal meetings and discussions at work, used as a proxy for informal collaborative learning at work. The interpretation of the data allows to assess how ICRC employees perceive the significance of, and opportunities for, informal collaborative learning in the organisation. Collected and analysed data can be used as background information for designing any further research.

### 3.2. Study population and sampling

No formal sample size was calculated for this study. Instead, a convenience sample was used, including all eligible participants, who were based in the East Asia, South-East Asia and Pacific region of the ICRC, and who agreed to take part in the study. The decision was based on convenience, with the researcher being located in Thailand, and because of the exploratory nature of the study (Bryman, 2008). At the time of designing the study, in 2013, there were eight main regions of ICRC activities: Eastern Africa; the Great Lakes and Southern Africa; Northern and Western Africa; Europe and Central

Asia; the Americas; Near and Middle East; South Asia; East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. Participants for the study were enrolled from 15 countries in the East Asia, South-East Asia and Pacific region, in which the ICRC had permanent representations: Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, East Timor, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Fiji, mainland China, Japan and North Korea.

To take part in any of the procedures in this study, participants had to be ICRC staff members working in one of the listed countries, and manage a team with at least one other team member for at least one year. For ethical reasons, the researcher, as well as otherwise eligible participants under direct supervision of the researcher (n=3), were not included in any of the procedures of the study involving reporting of data. There was no limitation on age, gender and type of contract, whether local, expatriate, or the rare case of a national Red Cross/Red Crescent Society staff member seconded to the ICRC, for study participation. Local contracts are given to employees who are citizens of the state in which they are employed; expatriate contracts are given to employees who are citizens of states other than the one they are employed in. Internal telephone directories, listed by department in each ICRC representation, provided the source material from which the survey sample was selected. In total, 177 ICRC staff members corresponded to the inclusion criteria listed above before the first pilot of the quantitative survey administration.

### 3.3. Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary. No compensation was paid for participation. All participants read and assented to an informed consent form before contributing to any of the procedures of the study (Appendix 1, Appendix 2) and were apprised of the confidentiality of the proceedings. Permission for conducting all procedures of the study was secured in advance from the relevant ICRC authorities, both at local level in Bangkok and at Headquarters level in Geneva.

Ethical issues can be distinguished as ethical “issues arising early in a project”, “as the project develops”, and “later in, or after, the project” (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2009).

The first type of issues, i.e. issues arising early in a project, include topics such as the worthiness of a project, the researcher’s competence to carry out the research, informed consent of participants, as well as benefits and costs of the study to each party involved (Punch, 2009).

Issues arising in the course of a project include “harm and risk”, “honesty and trust”, “privacy, confidentiality and anonymity”, as well as “intervention and advocacy” (Punch, 2009, p.50). No harm or potential risk related to study design was likely to affect participants. Participants were asked questions related to demographics and work experience. Some of these questions could potentially cause a participant to feel uncomfortable. Therefore, participants could choose whether to answer all or only some of the questions. An approach of not requiring responses unless absolutely necessary is also recommended in the survey literature (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). Participants’ views in the thesis were reflected as accurately as possible, to the best of the researcher’s ability and knowledge. Information about participants, and in particular information kept in digital repositories, could be accessed by third parties, which could potentially lead to negative experiences by the participants. All possible steps to guarantee participants’ privacy and confidentiality were undertaken and guaranteed by the researcher. No personal identifiers of any kind were or will be included in any form of report on this study. In addition, participants in the questionnaire were guaranteed a certain degree of possible anonymity. The SurveyMonkey programme, selected on purpose for the survey, did not allow to link a particular response to a specific respondent. No wrongful behaviour was witnessed in the course of the study, which would have required the researcher to report the incident or to change the initially designed procedures of the study (Punch, 2009). Advocacy was not an objective of this study. However, the mere discussion of informal types of collaborative learning could arguably be subsumed under a wider and pragmatic definition of advocacy. In particular, participants’ awareness could be raised of the issues at hand, and even be a catalyst for action on their part (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

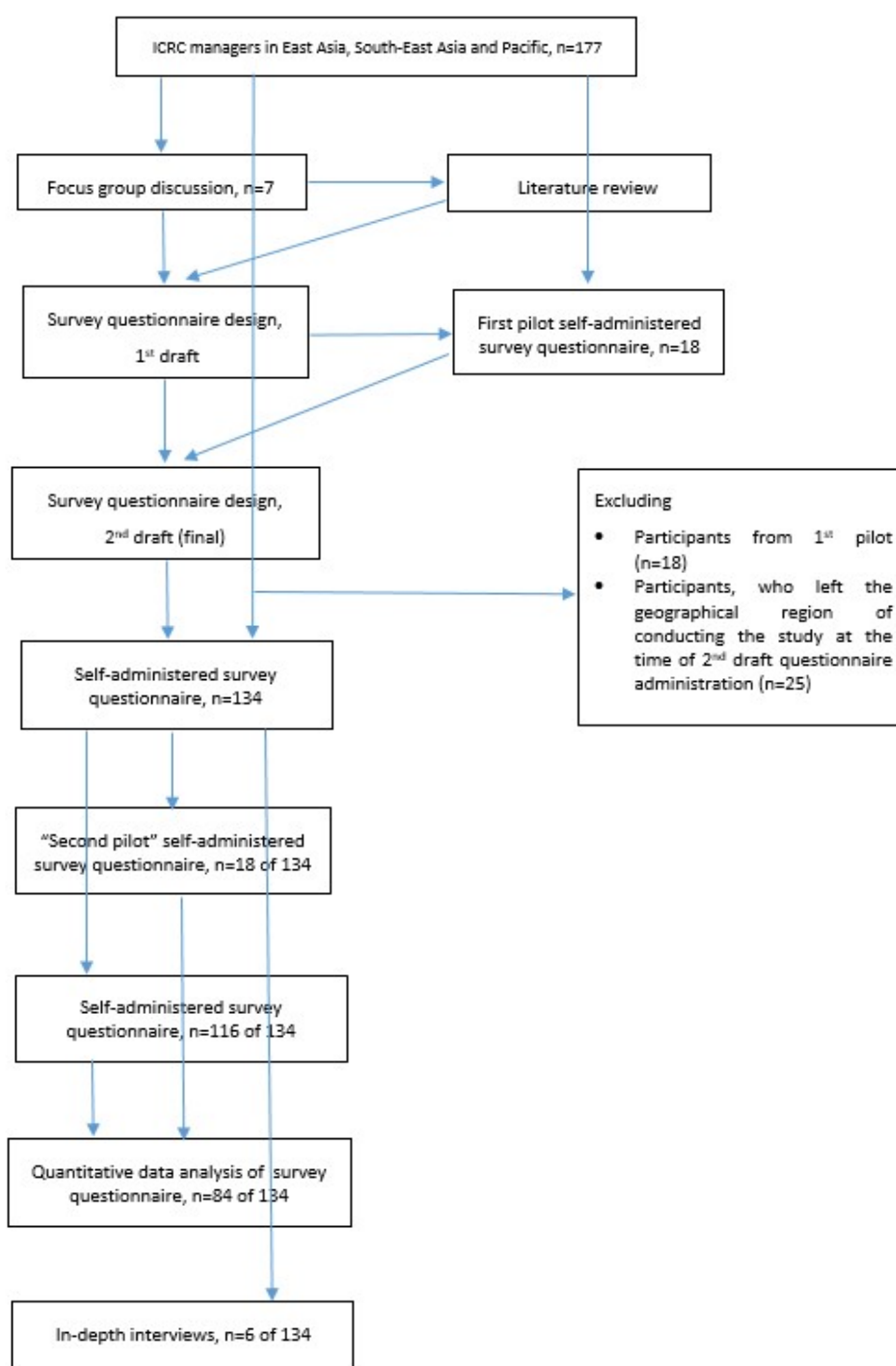
Finally, issues arising in the later stages of a project include “research integrity and quality”, the question of “ownership of data and conclusions”, and the “use and misuse of results” (Punch, 2009, p. 51). Again, these issues are related to the researcher’s rigour, precision, honesty and trust in conducting research. The results of the study are included in this thesis, submitted to the University of Bristol. Furthermore, the results will be shared with the ICRC, and submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

### 3.4. Study procedures

The empirical study included three major multilevel sequential procedures, with each of the procedures providing information for the next one (Figure 11): first, a focus group discussion on informal workplace learning among eligible participants; second, a self-administered survey questionnaire; and third, a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The focus group discussion was designed as a qualitative exercise. The results of the focus group discussion, presented below in this chapter, were aligned with the outcome of the systematic literature review on communities of practice and other related forms of informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations (presented in Chapter 2). This analysis of the focus group discussion was used in drafting the survey questionnaire for the quantitative assessment. The quantitative assessment resulted in a large amount of quantitative, as well as qualitative data, as many participants provided comments. The quantitative assessment was followed by another qualitative assessment – in-depth interviews. The interviews focused on the outcomes of the survey, with the purpose of exploring in more detail and complementing survey findings.

It was decided not to use the term “community of practice” in any of the procedures of the study, in order not to confuse participants with professional terminology, and to gather the broadest possible information on informal collaborative learning. All procedures of the study were conducted in English.

Figure 11. Flowchart of study procedures.



### 3.4.1. Focus group discussion

The purpose of the focus group discussion was to gather organisation-specific data on informal collaborative learning practices in the ICRC. This, aligned with the results from the literature review, was the basis for the draft of the survey questionnaire to be administered among eligible

participants. A readily available questionnaire was not used for two reasons. First, the systematic literature review on communities of practice and other forms of informal collaborative learning did not produce a questionnaire model. This was somewhat expected, as communities of practice have a highly dynamic structure. Second, communities of practice come in various forms in different organisations and are highly context dependent. The use of focus group discussions in survey item development, when little information on a specific topic of interest in a specific context is available, is well described in the literature (Morgan, 1997; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002). Focus group discussions allow for the collection of data on a topic determined by the researcher, as well as for the observation of interactions among participants (Morgan, 1996; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002).

Focus group participants have to be purposefully selected, and random selection from the population of interest is not required (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002). The focus group discussion for this study was conducted in person in the ICRC regional office in Bangkok. This was done for the purpose of convenience. In addition, a face-to-face group meeting has the advantage of giving a more personalised character to the event, and was seen as fostering trust among participants of this first discussion on informal collaborative learning. Seven out of ten (70%) eligible staff members agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. These included three expatriates and four locally hired staff members, thus providing diversity of background among a generally accepted number of participants in a shared environment (Barbour, 2007). The literature further suggests that a smaller number of participants, between six and eight persons, yields better results (Rabiee, 2004). The discussion was facilitated by one facilitator, the researcher. It took place in June 2013 during lunch time; pizza and soft drinks were offered. The discussion lasted about 60 minutes, which corresponds to the length of similar activities in the literature (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002; Rabiee, 2004).

### *Qualitative data analysis*

Thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis, was applied to analyse the data (Brown and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is characterised by flexibility and the possibility of

being applied to different theoretical approaches and research paradigms (Brown and Clarke, 2006). Brown and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. “Themes” emerge from the data, as in other methods for qualitative data analysis. A theme represents something important about the data, related to the research question. It reveals a certain degree of a pattern within the data, although the frequency of one particular theme appearing within the data set is not necessarily related to the “keyness” of that theme. This makes thematic analysis a useful method for under-studied areas, when little information on a specific topic of interest is available. The method allows for a detailed account of qualitative data. In relation to qualitative data analysis, there is no common opinion on when is the best time to conduct the literature review, relevant to the research questions (Brown and Clarke, 2006). An early literature review could narrow the analytical focus, or, on the contrary, could sensitise to more subtle nuances in the data (Brown and Clarke, 2006). For this study, the literature review was started in the early stages in order to get better acquainted with the topic, including subtle specificities. At the same time, the data collection instruments were kept as open as possible in an attempt at avoiding scientific terminology.

Brown and Clarke (2006) outline six phases for conducting a thematic analysis. The first phase involves familiarisation with the data through immersion and careful reading of the data. This phase also includes transcription of the data, as an essential part of data analysis. The second phase consists in generating initial codes. Codes are defined as basic elements of raw data, without being separated from the context, which the researcher assesses could contribute meaningfully to the research questions. Transcription of data and coding can be done manually, which is still widely practiced for smaller amounts of data, or by using software applications. The third phase consists in searching for themes, by sorting different codes into potential themes. The fourth and fifth phases are related to reviewing the themes, resulting in a reduction of the number of themes, followed by a definition of the essence of each theme. As a result, sub-themes might emerge. Finally, the sixth phase involves the final analysis and the writing of the report. The report, Brown and Clarke (2006) argue, should



provide adequate evidence for defining the themes, which thus need to be demonstrated through appropriate data extracts.

The inclusion of verbatim quotations from participants has become a standard practice in social science research (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006). This, Corden and Sainsbury (2006) argue, is particularly compatible with a pragmatic research approach. Corden and Sainsbury (2006) found that the main purpose of using verbatim quotations in reporting results was related to providing evidence for interpreted data, or for explaining it. Through verbatim quotations, the understanding of the data can be deepened, and new themes emerge (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006).

As noted, thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative data analysis. It is, for instance, at the base of Framework, developed at the National Centre for Social research in the UK (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In Framework, themes and sub-themes are entered into a matrix for each case in order to organise and interpret data (Bryman, 2008; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This approach of coding and searching for themes shows also some similarities to grounded theory, where different levels of coding are applied to find patterns in the data and to develop theory, grounded in the data (Brown and Clarke, 2006; Punch, 2009). In summary, no matter the details of the specific approach applied for qualitative data analysis, the qualitative data is taken “from a descriptive to a conceptual or theoretical level” (Punch, 2009, p.179).

### *Focus group discussion results*

Qualitative data from the focus group discussion was systematically analysed, applying Brown and Clarke’s (2006) phases for thematic analysis outlined above. The collected qualitative data was recorded and later transcribed manually, generating about 6,000 words of text. This data was read carefully, and codes were generated manually. The focus group discussion followed a loose grid of five open-ended questions, related to the perception of and opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the ICRC. The questions were developed by the researcher, with the understanding that the topic under study had neither been previously studied, nor that it was well-developed in the organisation under study. The discussion was facilitated by the researcher. The role of the facilitator

was mainly to help participants in the discussion to stay focused and to encourage them to express ideas freely (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002). All opinions were expressed voluntarily. The focus group discussion started with a presentation by the facilitator of the topic for discussion, assurances about confidentiality and the signature of an informed consent form by the participants (Appendix 1). Participants then briefly introduced themselves. The first question for discussion was a general question on what modes of learning contributed most to learning in the workplace. This question was chosen because communities of practice are foremost about learning. Workshops and seminars, organised by the organisation, were selected by the first participant who opened the discussion. However, the second participant moved the discussion into more informal types of learning, including learning by doing and coaching by predecessors or supervisors. This line of thought was taken up by the rest of the participants, who added the importance of allowing learning from mistakes by giving space and responsibility, in particular to younger staff members; as well as learning from outside sources on the internet, and from friends. The importance of identifying needs and personal motivation, as well as a common language for communication, was also raised. It was said that there is a growing “learning atmosphere” in the organisation, “people would like to learn and improve themselves, to be ready for their work, to know more and gain the knowledge” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). This “learning atmosphere” resonates with Lassila, Mäntylä and Kantola’s (2007) willingness to try something new and overall curiosity, as well as the motivation and passion mentioned by Russel et al. (2011), as discussed in Chapter 2. It reflects a positive evolution in terms of readiness to learn as compared to the “activist” humanitarian culture described a decade earlier by Edwards (1997), which considered learning a luxury and a distraction from “real work”, as explored in Chapter 1. Another participant argued, however, that the habit of self-learning is still lacking in the organisation.

The second question directed the discussion towards informal workplace learning, by asking what is “offered”, in practice, for learning in the workplace in the ICRC, apart from formal courses. It was agreed that there are many courses available on the organisation’s e-learning platform. However,

“time” availability seemed to be an issue for this type of self-directed learning. “The kind of training I was looking for, is there. I can access it. I know it’s only six hours, but still, you have to find the time in the day” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). Another issue, related to this, was explained by information overflow and collaborative online workspaces: “...these collaborative workspaces, there will be no more individual messages, everything thrown out there. ‘Oh, you haven’t seen it? It was yesterday on intranet’...sometimes we even intentionally blind ourselves” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). Sending staff to different contexts and different structures was pointed out as another learning option outside of organised courses.

The third question asked participants whether they had benefitted from more informal learning in the workplace. All participants agreed on the key role of informal learning in the organisation, including learning by doing, identifying weaknesses and mistakes, connecting with more experienced colleagues and further coaching; defining objectives and following up on achievements on regular basis with line-managers; promoting activities with other departments within the organisation, so that we “know better what the whole can contribute” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013); brainstorming and group discussions. A participant underlined the importance of “Lync”, the internal communication software, which had recently been introduced at the time of the focus group discussion, for connecting people from Afghanistan to the Philippines, and beyond. At annual regional department meetings, staff members made the “human bond” in person, and then continued with online communication – “you don’t know how to do, ask your colleague... just link them together and they will help each other” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). Formal courses were appreciated for providing theoretical knowledge, certificates and thus confidence. However, informal learning was perceived as more creative, stimulating the imagination and “more needed for doing the correct things” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). Formal courses were also seen as an opportunity for the possible creation of informal intra-organisational “networks”, thus “opening more ways for informal learning” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013).

This was further explored in the last two questions, focusing on characteristics of such informal learning groups, both already existing ones and potential future ones. As noted, a social event, for instance a formal course or an annual meeting or other form of knowledge exchange, was an important initial trigger for the start of an informal learning network. However, such networks required someone with adequate computer networking as well as professional knowledge, willing to facilitate contacts among participants, creating relationships, and making them more pro-active and encouraging a learning atmosphere. If it was well organised, the network had a bigger chance to be successful. Adequate modern communication technology was essential for such networks. Networks usually started small, connecting people from different countries within the organisation, often within one geographical area, in this case the East Asia, South-East Asia and Pacific region. Sometimes, staff members participating in networks came from countries with a history of mutual conflict, for instance from India and Pakistan. This was not seen as a problem, however. Rather, organisational culture and the humanitarian principles around which it was built were seen as crucial factors enabling the network to grow. In “the ICRC, we have the same issues, same styles, same way, so this is one way” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013). In addition, the fact that this type of communication happened predominantly online seemed to be breaking boundaries, be they hierarchical or cultural, e.g. staff members belonging to different casts in India. People became more confident and communication, which otherwise would have been impossible, became feasible. Group online meetings were not seen as essential for the network’s life, mainly because of time restrictions. Line managers and course facilitators were expected to play a somewhat bigger role, mainly by encouraging the formation and the development of informal networks; however, they were not seen as network facilitators, corroborating McDermott and Archibald’s (2010) argument. These networks were predominantly limited within the organisation. This was explained by the organisation’s culture and mandate of being independent, impartial, and the practice of relatively cautious public communication. However, most participants in the focus group discussion found these principles quite restrictive in today’s dynamic world, and considered forming networks outside the organisation

possible and necessary. “It is a very competitive work, even for the ICRC, so you really have to. You have to know what the others are doing, and how they do it” (participant in the focus group discussion, 2013).

In summary, the outcome of the focus group discussion demonstrated that ICRC employees value highly the opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the organisation. The focus group discussion was much welcomed by the participants. Some participants expressed at the end of the discussion a desire for further such gatherings. Several themes and sub-themes, relevant to the research questions, emerged from the discussion. A number of modes, contributing to learning in the workplace, including learning by doing and from peers, evaluation and feedback, coaching and mentoring, self-directed e-learning and a general “learning atmosphere” were discussed. Time and information overload were major limitation factors for self-directed e-learning. More formal learning experiences, i.e. training courses, seminars, and workshops, were appreciated for the theoretical knowledge they provided, preferably coupled with a certificate, and for connecting people and creating an opportunity for further development of informal learning “networks” within the organisation. The “networks” were usually formed around some work-related topic and organised by a competent and proactive self-appointed facilitator. The spontaneous formation of these relatively modest “networks” resonates with the self-emerging communities of practice described by Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006), as discussed in Chapter 2. Stronger support from management and leadership for the work of the “networks” was desired. Modern ICT support was seen as essential for the development and the life of the “networks”, connecting people from different countries, working in different locations for the same organisation. The organisational culture, with its shared repertoire, played a strong role for creating a feeling of belonging to a community among ICRC staff members, at the same time being somewhat limiting in today’s dynamic environment to encourage necessary interaction on a more informal group basis with other organisations.

### *3.4.2. Survey questionnaire*

The key findings from the focus group discussion, aligned with other characteristics of communities of practice and other related forms of informal collaborative learning, as outlined in Chapter 2, were used to draft the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was then self-administered for testing among a random sub-sample of eligible participants, adapted, and self-administered again among remaining eligible participants, to gather quantitative data on informal collaborative learning in the organisation.

The survey questions aimed at collecting data on staff member learning, collaborative learning, learning communities and demographics. The first draft of the questionnaire contained background information and an informed consent form on the first page, 34 questions, and a thank you note at the end, following recommendations for social survey design (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). The survey was piloted among a random sample of approximately 10% of eligible participants (18 out of 177) in April 2014. The survey was self-administered online, using the SurveyMonkey software (2014). Invitations to follow a web link to take the survey pilot had been e-mailed using a standard text and generic greeting. The objective was to test whether respondents would understand the questions, thus to increase the validity of the final survey (Fogelman and Comber, 2007). The response rate of this initial pilot was low, at 22% (n=4 out of 18). A qualitative assessment of the four responses to the survey questionnaire demonstrated understanding of the questions. Pilot survey results were not included in the final data analysis.

Because of the low response rate to the pilot questionnaire, a number of changes were made with the aim of improving the response rate. First, the generic greeting was replaced by a personalised message with the same invitation text (Baruch and Holtom, 2008); second, background information and the informed consent notice were shortened; third, survey questions were revised and shortened to 26 questions (Appendix 2). Eight questions, either open-ended, or collecting potentially similar data, were removed. The personalised greeting message was expected to contribute to a higher rate of

starting the survey questionnaire. The reduced number of questions was expected to contribute to a higher rate of completion of the survey questionnaire. The revised questionnaire draft was discussed among the researcher's team members.

The second, and final, draft of the questionnaire was administered in July 2014 to all eligible participants initially identified and corresponding to inclusion/exclusion criteria (n=177), excluding those who had left their position in the meantime (n=25), and those who took part in the first pilot questionnaire (n=18). In total, the final version of the test questionnaire was sent to 134 ICRC staff members, via the professional IBM Notes e-mail application of the ICRC (IBM, 2014). Participants were given three weeks to self-complete the questionnaire. This second and final draft of the questionnaire was sent in two "batches". Initially, it was sent to a "second pilot" of 18 participants (out of 134), a number similar to that in the first pilot. Ten participants of these 18 (56%), returned valid responses within two weeks. Then, the same questionnaire was sent to the remaining eligible participants (116 out of 134). Results from the second pilot were included in the final data analysis. In total, from the two batches, 84 of 134 (63%) participants returned partly, over 75%, or completely filled in questionnaires, and were included in the final data analysis. Because of ethical considerations, as already noted, responses were not mandatory for all questions. A response rate below 100% might be related to lack of interest and/or experience with the research focus. Nevertheless, the response rate was above the acceptable threshold of 60%, as discussed in the literature (Johnson and Wislar, 2012), and well above the average response rate in organisational research (Baruch and Holtom, 2008).

What was the rationale behind the 26 survey questions? The first question secured the informed consent to participate in the study. Questions 2 and 3 addressed staff member learning, based on the results of the focus group outcome, where modes of learning, including learning by doing, learning atmosphere, learning from peers through "networks", individual coaching and mentoring, self-directed e-learning and more formal workshops and face-to-face training sessions were identified as contributing to learning in the ICRC. Question 4 addressed how such informal meetings were taking place, focusing on the opportunities modern technologies provide for

communication and connecting people, based on the tools used in the ICRC (Bolam et al., 2005; Russel et al., 2011; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008).

The next 13 questions, questions 5 to 17, addressed different aspects of informal collaborative learning, including characteristics of learning communities, based on the literature review, as well as the focus group discussion. Questions 5 and 6 aimed at assessing partnerships, openness and networks (Bolam et al., 2005; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002; focus group discussion). Questions 7, 8 and 10 reflected on more characteristics of learning communities as per Bolam's (2005) model of professional learning communities and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's (2002) steps for cultivating a community of practice, including shared values and responsibility for learning of all staff members, engaging in collaborative and individual further learning, as well as topics for discussion during the informal meetings. Question 9 reflected the importance of "defining objectives and following on the achievement on regular basis with the line-managers", outlined during the focus group discussion. Questions 11, 12 and 15 addressed directly matters related to knowledge creation, including diversity, generation of new ideas and ultimately change (Guldborg et al., 2013; Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999; Venters and Woods, 2007). Question 13 covered the importance of contradiction and conflict for the creation of new knowledge in an environment of trust, mutual respect and support (Bolam et al., 2005; Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Question 14 evaluated the presence of shared repertoire, a key indicator of a community of practice (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008; Wenger, 1998) and very prevalent in the ICRC (focus group discussion). Question 16 studied facilitation and leadership of informal collaborative learning groups, another key element defined by the literature for their success (McDermott and Archibald, 2010; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Question 17 addressed the important issue of the "life" of a community of practice (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). As Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006) conclude, further research is needed to understand the "death" or transition of a community of practice.



Questions 18 and 19 concluded the survey by asking whether, while participating in such informal collaborative groups, respondents felt part of a community of managers and/or part of an organisation-wide learning community, respectively. Question 19 also alluded to the concept of the learning organisation - with communities of practice, being the knowledge management tool for work-based learning, leading to the learning organisation. The survey questionnaire was completed with a collection of demographic data. Questions 20 to 26 gathered data on participant gender, age, level of education, position in the organisation and type of contract, as well as years in management and staff under supervision, as the literature shows that such factors may have an influence on learning (Doornbos, Simons and Denessen, 2008; Fee and Gray, 2011; Neufeld, Fang and Wan, 2013).

For most questions, a four-point Likert scale was used for data collection. Even though the benefits of adding a middle neutral response are recognised by some authors (Østerås et al., 2008), using a four-point scale also has its advantages, such as allowing for more solid, full or partial, responses (Chang, 1994; Dolinicar and Grün, 2013; Edwards and Smith, 2014). In addition, to avoid a forcing of answers, for various reasons, as discussed above, the options of “no response”, “not applicable”, and skipping an entire question were allowed. Responses using any of these options were not included in the data analysis. Further, when appropriate, a more diverse response format was used in order to allow respondents to better differentiate responses and thus to avoid, or at least reduce, satisficing, as suggested in the literature (Vannette and Krosnick, 2014).

### *Quantitative data analysis*

The collected quantitative data was entered into an Excel database (Microsoft, 2013a). STATA/IC version 11.2 for Windows (Statacorp LP, TX, USA) was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to present the results from the questionnaire. All variables were presented as categorical data. Continuous variables, including age, time in management and staff under supervision were grouped in categories and presented as categorical data as well. For the purpose of clarity of the analysis, data for questions 8 to 11, 13, 18 and 19 was later dichotomised to

agree, including strongly agree and disagree, vs. disagree, including disagree and strongly disagree. Dichotomised variables were coded, with No=0 and Yes=1. Data were summarised by number and percentage. Comments, adjusted to some of the survey questions, were analysed and presented as qualitative data, supported by verbatim quotations.

In addition, for assessing the significance in the difference of variables among participants who felt part of a community of managers or not (question 18) on one side, and among participants who agreed that managers in the ICRC are part of an organisation-wide learning community or not (question 19), Fisher's exact test was applied. Fisher's exact test was selected because of the small absolute number of respondents, less than five, in some of the sub-samples, and the exploratory character of the analysis. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Findings with a p-value between 0.05 and 0.1 are discussed as well. Differences might not be that strong in this case, yet they might still produce meaningful information (Dahiru, 2008; Schmidt, 1996).

### *3.4.3. In-depth interviews*

The empirical data collection was completed with a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview schedule was based on the main trends, which emerged from the quantitative data collection and analysis (Appendix 3). The aim of this qualitative instrument was to explore more in-depth some of the main issues looked at in the quantitative part of the research, and to get more tacit insight through respondents' views on some of the main findings, as well as possibly trace some alternative emerging themes (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2012).

Six of the 134 eligible staff members who were invited to complete the final survey questionnaire, were invited to participate in an in-depth interview. When the qualitative component is intended to complement a quantitative analysis, a sample size between 5 and 10 participants is considered acceptable (Mertens, 2010; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). To ensure the diversity of interviewees, the stratifying criteria of gender and contractual status were applied to select a sample of six interviewees among the study population (Bryman, 2008), shown in table1. In this way, gender

balance was achieved with three women and three men, half of them being expatriates, the other half locally-hired managers. Applying the stratifying criteria, the six participants were randomly selected from the whole group (n=134), to which the questionnaire had been sent. All six initially selected participants accepted to be interviewed. The participants could not be further diversified, based on their responses to the survey questionnaire. For ethical reasons, the strictest SurveyMonkey settings had intentionally been applied. Under these settings, it was not possible to link respondents' answers to specific study participants, which ensured a high degree of anonymity.

*Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interviewees.*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Contract</b>	<b>Function</b>
1	Female	Expatriate	Support
2	Female	Expatriate	Operations
3	Female	Local	Operations
4	Male	Local	Top field management
5	Male	Expatriate	Operations
6	Male	Local	Support

Interviews were conducted between December, 2014 and April, 2015, using the Lync professional video call software (Microsoft, 2013b) for all but two interviews, which were conducted in the ICRC offices in Bangkok in person. The interviews were conducted by one interviewer, the researcher. Qualitative data from the interviews was systematically analysed, applying Brown and Clarke's (2006) phases for thematic analysis outlined above. Interview data was transcribed manually, codes were generated manually and searched for themes. Verbatim quotations were commonly used in the presentation of the data, providing evidence for interpretations, deepening understanding and preserving rich tacit insight, as well as highlighting some new emerging themes.

### 3.5. Reliability, validity and limitations of the study

The reliability of study results is related to the degree of replicability of the results, if study procedures are repeated. The empirical data for the study was gathered through a questionnaire and interviews with participants. Such assessment tools are often subjective and potentially biased. The questionnaire was based on the systematic analysis of a focus group discussion, and thus ensured relevance to the specific context of the organisation, as well as being aligned with a comprehensive literature review. The questionnaire having been specifically designed for the context of this study means that it had not been tested elsewhere. On one hand, while this allows for gathering more context-specific data, on the other, it makes comparisons with other studies more difficult. In order to reduce potential bias resulting from this format and increase the reliability and thus the internal validity of the study, various sequential tools for collecting data were used, including a focus group discussion, a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data thus collected was rigorously analysed, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study. However, one of the reasons for using both quantitative and qualitative methods is to approach an issue from different angles, and thus the confirmation of one by the other should not be overstated (Bush, 2007). This raises the question of the objectivity of quantitative and especially of qualitative components of social research. The discussion of informal collaborative learning could have generated “socially desirable” answers.

Internal validity refers mainly to the study design and whether it avoids confounding variables. A cross-sectional design of a study might not allow for determining a strong cause-effect relationship between variables. However, as discussed, it was an appropriate method for answering the second research question of this exploratory study, by providing a good starting point for gathering initial data and for implementing further procedures. The study results, especially from the qualitative procedures, might have been confounded by the background of the researcher, being a staff member of the organisation under study. Some of the survey respondents as well as most of the interviewees

were personally known to the researcher. Issues of response bias and social desirability may have played a role to some extent (Furnham, 1986; Kreuter, Presser and Tourangeau, 2008; McCambridge, de Bruin and Witton, 2012). Therefore, ethical issues, guarantees of strict confidentiality, and whenever possible some degree of anonymity (survey questionnaire) were rigorously addressed. Nevertheless, it is possible that some responses, particularly in the qualitative components of the study, would have turned out differently if the researcher had been an outsider. The researcher's personality and his personal perception of the research questions and the context might have been an additional confounding factor in this regard (Punch, 2009).

All eligible participants were invited to participate in the study, and 63% agreed to take part in it. According to the inclusion criteria, participation was limited to only one out of eight geographical regions of the ICRC. This raises the question about the external validity of the study and to what extent the findings could be applied to different contexts. As discussed, the ICRC is characterised by a strong organisational culture, crossing geographical borders, and overcoming potential tensions among staff members coming from countries with a mutual history of conflict. By definition, an international humanitarian organisation is operational in different sites and, in the case of the ICRC, spans the globe. The East Asia, South-East Asia and Pacific region is quite diverse in terms of geography, ethnicities, religion and development. Further, as the results chapter will demonstrate, a large part of the participants were expatriates, changing their country of work every few years. Similarly, locally-hired staff in management positions are commonly exposed to different ICRC contexts for experiential learning. In addition, as the quantitative results will demonstrate, the study population was also quite diverse in terms of gender, age, education, contractual situation, as well as function, experience, and team size. All this contributes to higher external validity of the study findings, permitting the results of this study to be used as a baseline point for conducting any future research in the field of informal collaborative learning within the whole organisation, as well as a comparative base for similar research in other organisations.

The external validity of the study could have been further increased by seeking the opinion of all staff members, including non-managers. This would have added further dimensions to the survey results and to the in-depth interviews. As this was an exploratory study and the literature review pointed out the essential role of managers for staff learning (Beattie, 2006; Jansen, Cammock and Conner, 2010; Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2017), the study for this thesis was limited to managers. In addition, line managers and formal course facilitators were expected to play a somewhat bigger role in the formation and development of informal networks, as discussed in the focus group. Further, though leading a team is different from leading a community, managers are expected to be involved in the communities of practice in organisations (McDermott and Archibald, 2010). Likewise, the study could also have surveyed managers and non-managers in other humanitarian organisations, which would have allowed for comparisons between organisations.

Despite the limitations outlined above, the cross-sectional study design with quantitative and qualitative components allowed for the collection of rich data and to answer the second research question, regarding how ICRC managers perceived the significance of and opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the organisation. The exploratory study results provide solid data, which can be used for any future theoretical or applied research on informal collaborative learning within and outside the organisation.

## Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The chapter presents the empirical findings from the quantitative and qualitative (in-depth interviews) components of the study, and answers the second research question - how do ICRC managers perceive the significance of and opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the ICRC? Results are organised into four major themes, based on the survey questionnaire – demographic characteristics of survey participants; staff member learning; informal collaborative learning and learning communities. Quantitative survey results are presented in a descriptive way and substantiated with qualitative data from the in-depth interviews. In addition, the difference in variables among participants who felt part of a community of managers or not, on one hand, and among participants who agreed that managers in the ICRC are part of an organisation-wide learning community or not, on the other, was assessed. Thus presented, data is analysed and complemented with a discussion on how it projects on the literature background. A further discussion on how these findings align with the background of the literature addresses the third research question – how can informal collaborative learning be improved and furthered better in a practical way in the ICRC?

Between July and August 2014, 84 of 134 (63%) eligible participants responded to at least 75% of the questions in the survey questionnaire, with the majority of participants responding to approximately 90% of the questions (Appendix 4). As the response rate was comparably high and answering to questions was not mandatory for ethical reasons, all survey responses were included in the quantitative data analysis.

### 4.1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants

Twenty-six of 75 (35%) participants were female, and 49 (65%) were male (Appendix 4). Fifty-two of 75 (69%) participants were below 44 years of age. Over 90% of respondents had a university degree, with most having achieved master's level, 44 out of 74 (60%) respondents. Approximately two-thirds of participants were expatriates and one-third were locally hired. There was an equal

distribution of respondents between operational (protection and assistance in armed conflicts) and support departments (administration, logistics, human resources or information and communication technology), with 39 % (25 out of 75) in each. Another 17 respondents (22%) were heads of unit (executive top management of an ICRC representation in an operational context at regional, country or office level). A majority of the respondents, 42 out of 74 (57%), had over five years of management experience in the organisation. In terms of team size, more than half of the respondents, 41 out of 75 (55%), were in charge of teams of over five staff under supervision, including team members whom they supervised on a daily basis as their line manager, as well as colleagues reporting to other line managers, but for whose technical or functional output they were responsible.

Data on demographics, and especially on educational background and contractual status, is not readily available in the literature on international humanitarian organisations and the not-for-profit sector in general. The systematic literature review, presented earlier, found few studies looking into a limited number of these characteristics (Doornbos, Simons and Denessen, 2008; Fee and Gray, 2011; Neufeld, Fang and Wan, 2013), out of which only one made an interpretation of the results related to learning in the workplace (Doornbos, Simons and Denessen, 2008).

To contribute to the scarce literature in the field, the demographic characteristics were further analysed in relation to the focus of this study. Among the various demographic characteristics captured in this study, two stand out as statistically significant, i.e. participants' level of education and contractual status, depending on whether participants were in the group agreeing that they were part of an organisation-wide learning community or in the group which did not agree with that statement (Table 2).

Respondents agreeing with the statement were more likely to be locally-hired staff members, rather than expatriates ( $p\text{-value}=0.002$ ), and to have lower levels of education, having obtained a bachelor's rather than a master's degree ( $p\text{-value}=0.007$ ).



Table 2. Demographic characteristics, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test.

Variable	Not part of LCM*, n=25 n	Part of LCM, n=47 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value	Not part of OLC*, n=22 n	Part of OLC, n=51 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value
<b>Gender, n=75</b>			0.426			0.282
female	6	17		10	15	
male	19	30		12	36	
<b>Age, n=75</b>			1.000			0.094*
<44	17	33		12	39	
>44	8	14		10	12	
<b>Education, n=74</b>			0.134			0.007*
Secondary	2	3		1	4	
Bachelor	4	19		2	21	
Master	18	24		18	25	
Post master	0	1		1	0	
<b>Contract, n=75</b>			0.150			0.002*
GVA	20	28		18	30	
NS	1	2		2	0	
DE	4	17		2	21	
<b>Department, n=75</b>			0.208			0.206
Operational	7	22		11	17	
Support	10	17		5	23	
Head	8	8		6	11	
<b>Time in management, years n=74</b>			0.011*			0.141
<5	5	26		6	25	
5-14	17	17		14	20	
>15	2	4		2	5	
<b>Staff under supervision, n=75</b>			0.139			0.610
<=2	3	12		3	13	
3-5	4	13		5	11	
>5	18	22		14	27	

\*LCM, learning community of managers; OLC, organisation-wide learning community

Managers below 44 years of age also showed a trend towards being in the group feeling part of an organisation-wide learning community (p-value=0.094). In addition, respondents with less than five years in management were significantly more likely to be in the group that perceived managers in the informal meetings or groups as forming a learning community (p-value=0.011).

Tabulating the demographic characteristic of educational level by that of contractual situation showed that 71% of expatriate respondents had a master's degree (34 out of 48), vs. only 39% (9 out of 23) of locally-hired respondents (Table 3).

*Table 3. Relation between educational level and contractual status.*

Educational Level	Contractual Situation			Total
	Expatriate	National Red Cross/Red Crescent	Local	
Secondary	2	0	3	5
Bachelor	11	2	11	24
Master	34	1	9	44
Post master	1	0	0	1
Total	48	3	23	74

The age of participants, below and above 44 years respectively, was tabulated with that of contractual status (Table 4). There were approximately four times more expatriates in the older age group (19 out of 23, 83%), in comparison to locally-hired staff (4 out of 23, 17%). A limitation inherent in this approach is the fact that there were more expatriates than locally-contracted staff in the study sample. The actual study sample was a reflection of the reality on the ground at the time of data collection, as well as the limitation of study participation to managers.

Table 4. Relation between age and contractual status.

Age	Contractual Situation			Total
	Expatriate	National Red Cross/Red Crescent	Local	
25-44	30	3	19	52
45-64	19	0	4	23
Total	49	3	23	75

Being younger, with lower educational degrees is one possible explanation for locally-hired participants feeling statistically significantly more often part of an organisation-wide learning community. Similarly, managers with less than five years' time in management, were more often part of the group forming a learning community. Older staff may have felt that they have less to learn than younger managers who still have longer careers ahead of them. These findings corroborate Doornbos, Simons and Denessen's (2008) results, where a perceived high level of personal competence among Dutch police officers was negatively associated with learning collaboratively and from experts, and vice versa. More knowledgeable individuals have been shown to have a reduced desire to interact with others (Tesluk and Jacobs, 1998 cited by Neufeld, Fang and Wan, 2013, p.624).

The finding that locally-hired managers were feeling statistically significantly more often part of an organisation-wide learning community, was explored during the in-depth interviews (Appendix 5). A theme, which emerged during the interviews, was related to the motivation and ambition of locally-hired staff to become expatriates themselves. "They want to learn more, to fulfil that ambition", an interviewee suggested. The personal benefit of participating in such informal communities for learning and performing immediate tasks, especially for less experienced managers, and ultimately positioning themselves in the organisation for local staff, can be understood (Agranoff, 2008; Stahl, 2013). Potentially more available time for locally-hired staff, and respectively more time

constraints for expatriates, was suggested as another possible reason why locally-hired managers were more often in the group that agreed that they were part of an organisation-wide learning community. Because of the overall “activist culture” of the humanitarian field, making time for learning is not always easy (Edwards, 1997). The numerical superiority of locally-contracted staff in the organisation, at 84% of all employees (ICRC, 2017), coupled with a feeling of being interconnected, and part of a geographically more limited area, with a “shared understanding of the context”, was suggested by half of the interviewees as another possible reason for the outcome. This can be related to the initial core dimensions of mutual engagement and joint enterprise of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Neufeld, Fang and Wan (2013) demonstrated the positive associations between Wenger’s community of practice dimensions and individual learning. There was also the perception that locally-hired staff were subjected to more monitoring and feedback, compared to expatriates. It was even suggested that a certain level of superciliousness could be attributed to the status of expatriate. Two interviewees thought that expatriates tended to “hide the weakness”, to “avoid the exposure of not knowing something”, and that they were “expected to provide coaching”, and “supposed to provide the support, rather than receiving it”. Expatriates are expected to bring expertise to their country of posting, and at the same time are being exposed to a rich learning environment for themselves (Fee and Gray, 2011). In the case of the ICRC, expatriates are also expected to contribute with impartiality and independent opinion to the organisation’s operations in a conflict, compared to locally-hired staff members for whom the appearance of impartiality and independence are sometimes more difficult to project. This will be further analysed later on in relation to organisational culture. In addition, this result can be interpreted as locally-hired staff being the driving force behind change in the organisation. The power of locally-hired staff to shape organisational learning and culture should be recognised and well-integrated in organisational policies.

As noted in the introductory chapter, the ICRC is undergoing significant changes, implementing an administrative reform, one of whose principal objectives is to provide equal chances and opportunities for staff with equal competences, regardless of contract. Efforts have been undertaken by the organisation to reduce any difference in treatment based on contract (ICRC, 2012b). The empirical data for this study, the collection of which was completed in 2015, three years after the start of the reform, as well as the arguments pointed to above, seem to indicate that this goal may not yet have been fully achieved. A potential policy implication, to be recommended, could point towards the inclusion of younger segments of the workforce, as well as involving older staff, and the inclusion of expatriates and locally-hired staff members in the same informal collaborative learning groups. In this way, everyone can share their own diverse experience and learn from the diverse experience of others, contributing to innovation and new knowledge creation.

## 4.2. Staff member learning

Communities of practice are about learning, be it new knowledge creation or the sharing of existing knowledge. Promoting individual and collective learning is a key process for developing a learning community (Bolam et al., 2005). During the focus group discussion, several modes of more formal or more informal learning, which contribute to learning in the ICRC, were identified. In the survey questionnaire, what is the perceived significance of each of these modes of learning was further assessed by the respondents (Appendix 4). Out of the seven modes of learning, which had been outlined in the focus group discussion, two were related to more formal modes of learning (face-to-face courses and department workshops) and the remaining five to more informal modes of learning (learning by doing, peer groups, individual coaching, e-learning and learning atmosphere). Three out of these seven modes were evaluated to contribute significantly to learning more than 50%, including learning by doing (91%), individual coaching (77%) and learning atmosphere (61%). These

three modes were all forms of informal learning, based on collaboration and experience, and personal motivation for learning.

As Johnson (2007) argues, communities of practice can be defined as “action learning spaces”. In the comment section, given as an option to this question in the survey, several participants supported this outcome with narrative statements, including underlining the importance of learning by doing and reflection, by learning from mistakes, discussion of case studies and the important role personal motivation plays in the learning process. The primary role of learning by doing and coaching was further substantiated during the in-depth interviews, by all interviewees. According to two interviewees, coaching was also beneficial for identifying areas, which can be further improved through experiential learning or formal courses. Learning by doing can also be linked with reflection on practice, which can be seen as a tool for continuous evaluation of outcomes. Similarly, coaching was linked by half of the interviewees to defining goals and monitoring the progress of staff member learning. It created a feeling of being supported, as well as “passing humanitarian values and knowledge to the next generation”, as an interviewee noted.

One interviewee cautioned about the risk of learning false practices in the case of one-to-one coaching. Nevertheless, the essential role of experiential learning and coaching is well recognised in the literature, as well as having been confirmed by ICRC respondents. This was corroborated by ranking the importance of these modes of learning in relation to each other. Over half of all respondents, 44 out of 83 (53%) placed learning by doing first. Individual coaching and mentoring came second, followed by a learning atmosphere and face-to-face training. Departmental workshops and peer groups scored lower. E-learning was evaluated as the mode contributing least to learning in the workplace, in spite of it being increasingly promoted in the organisation and outside. Getting access to reliable internet connections in some of the contexts in which the ICRC works, was mentioned by a respondent in the comment section, as a possible reason for this. It was recognised that e-learning was becoming more interactive, yet, there wasn't enough interaction with people,

according to five of six interviewees. One still needed the experiential and/or collaborative learning to apply knowledge to the specific context. And in the ICRC “everything is dependent on the context”, “I learn a great deal from colleagues. ICRC for me is unique. I cannot take knowledge from school and just apply it with the ICRC”, one interviewee said, an opinion supported along similar lines by four interviewees. In this regard, one interviewee suggested that some forms of e-learning, including role plays and simulations adapted to the organisational context, could be helpful for learning in the organisation. The necessity to adapt knowledge to the context in non-governmental and humanitarian organisations is well acknowledged in the literature (Mano, 2010; Verkoren, 2010). In addition, e-learning was felt to be a “lonely form of learning”, requiring “a lot of motivation to follow through”, as well as time. One interviewee noted that affinity for e-learning also depended on individual learning styles. In contrast, as already discussed in the literature review, communities of practice provide one of the fastest ways to share knowledge and learn (Fee and Gray, 2011). An interviewee reflected: “It is the first time I am hearing the phrase ‘learning community’. I realise that it is all around us, and how I have learned and survived from the beginning, and how I have become successful at a later stage.”

The results outlined above were reflected in the comparison of the groups that felt part of a learning community on the one hand, and those who felt part of an organisation-wide learning community, on the other hand (Table 5). Respondents who perceived that participants in the informal meetings or groups formed a learning community of managers, rated learning by doing as the only mode of learning under study that contributed significantly to the learning process ( $p\text{-value}=0.017$ ). Face-to-face courses and individual coaching were appreciated as well; however, the difference between the two groups (forming a community or not), did not reach statistical significance. Similarly, face-to-face courses ( $p\text{-value}=0.077$ ) and individual coaching ( $p\text{-value}=0.073$ ) showed a trend of difference between the groups, depending on whether participants were in the group agreeing that they were part of an organisation-wide learning community or in the group which did not agree with that statement. A respondent commented that a combination of more formal courses and less formal

learning, especially learning by doing and coaching, works more effectively, supporting the concept of work-based learning, integrating formal and informal learning.

Table 5. Staff member learning, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test.

Variable	Not part of LCM*, n=25 n	Part of LCM, n=47 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value	Not part of OLC*, n=22 n	Part of OLC, n=51 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value
<b>Modes of learning, contributing to workplace learning</b>						
<b>Face-to- face courses, n=84</b>			0.078*			0.077*
Minimally	5	2		4	3	
Somewhat	10	27		13	24	
Significantly	10	18		5	24	
<b>Learning by doing, n=84</b>			0.017*			1.000
Minimally	0	1		0	1	
Somewhat	5	1		2	5	
Significantly	20	45		20	45	
<b>Learning atmosphere in the team, n=84</b>			0.836			0.394
Minimally	2	2		2	2	
Somewhat	7	14		5	18	
Significantly	16	31		15	31	
<b>Peer groups, n=82</b>			0.441			0.571
Minimally	1	5		1	5	
Somewhat	17	24		14	26	
Significantly	7	16		6	19	
<b>Workshops by the department, n=84</b>			0.157			0.410
Minimally	2	1		0	3	
Somewhat	15	22		14	24	
Significantly	8	24		8	24	
<b>Individual coaching, n=83</b>			0.084*			0.073*
Minimally	0	4		3	1	
Somewhat	7	5		5	7	
Significantly	18	37		14	42	
<b>E-learning, n=82</b>			0.250			0.499
Minimally	7	13		7	13	
Somewhat	12	28		11	31	
Significantly	6	4		14	5	

\*LCM, learning community of managers; OLC, organisation-wide learning community



### 4.3. Informal collaborative learning

To answer the second research question, the study sought opinions on various elements, which have been outlined in the literature review and the focus group discussion on informal collaborative learning (Appendix 4).

First, referring to the importance of making time and space for learning, participants were asked to assess how such informal meetings or discussions were taking place, based on the tools used in the ICRC: in person, online, via teleconference, e-mail or an online forum. Meeting in person and e-mail correspondence were considered the primary forum for collaborative learning, followed closely by online meetings. This trend seems to be consistent with some of the more recent literature discussed in the first two chapters with respect to the growing development of virtual and hybrid learning communities. Communities of practice require relatively simple technologies, grounded in opportunities for connecting people (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; McDermott and Archibald, 2010). ICT evolves continuously. Developing new ways for communication and connecting people could prove beneficial for fostering communities of practice. There was no significant difference between the groups that felt part of a learning community of managers, or not, and those that felt part of an organisation-wide learning community, or not, in relation to this variable.

Over half of all respondents (44 out of 81, or 54%) felt that having a dedicated online forum was not yet one of the main platforms in the ICRC for collaborative learning: “the forum was created on Lotus Notes, but almost abandoned”. This outcome somewhat corroborates Venters and Wood’s (2007) study, where the forum created for the British Council country directors was used for a few months before participation dropped and it was abandoned. In contrast, as a respondent of the survey questionnaire commented, in the ICRC “access was given to all staff members. Questions came too many, some were already answered on managers’ level, the forum became boring”. This supports the discussion above about some differentiation between staff members still prevailing. In spite of this questionnaire result, during the in-depth interviews, the idea of creating a social network within the

organisation, primarily for employees of the ICRC, was welcomed. Most of the interviewees, five out of six, felt that some kind of platform of this type would be very useful, “a great idea”, and it “would work really well”, as long as it was “managed properly”, and would help to break down departmental “silos”, especially if learning communities were established “outside the normal working team”. Studies have supported successful results with online forums with proper management and stimulation of participation (Guldborg et al., 2013; Russel et al., 2011; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Further, a well-organised knowledge management forum can be used to reduce the effects of top-down hierarchical structures in an organisation (Guldborg et al., 2013).

With appropriate modern communication technology, location did not seem to matter. Most often, participants in informal meetings or discussions were from the same functional background, located in different sites, 29 out of 77 participants (38%), followed by different departments in one site, 23 out of 77 participants (30%). This data could be related to the focus group discussion outcome, which found that a formal course or an annual regional meeting of the department was perceived as an important trigger to start an informal peer group or network among the various attendees by site or department. The latter, though a more formal organisational course or event, and not a specific public event for a community of practice initiation, can be seen as resonating with Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) principles for cultivating a community of practice.

Seven out of 77 (9%) respondents stated that such informal meetings or discussions were attended by members of the same team (from the same department in one site). Although communities of practice normally do not overlap with departmental teams (McDermott and Archibald, 2010), as long as learning is ongoing, and knowledge is being shared and new knowledge created, arguably a community of practice could also develop within teams that are less frequently exchanging with non-members. Of course, diversity is at the base of new knowledge creation. Bezjian, Holmstrom, and Kipley (2009) argue that communities of practice can be seen as cross-functional working groups, allowing for the free exchange of knowledge and being at the core of the knowledge

management process. The ICRC's informal collaborative meetings or discussions seemed to include diverse participants; as discussed above, in over 90% of meetings or discussions, participants were either from various departments or different sites. In addition, two thirds of respondents thought that participants in informal meetings or discussions came from diverse hierarchical, professional and educational backgrounds.

Inclusiveness with different levels of participation, i.e. the presence of both more active and more passive members, as well as more knowledgeable ones and less knowledgeable ones, are key characteristics of learning communities (Bolam et al., 2005; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The importance of diversity of participants in learning communities was acknowledged by half of the interviewees. However, one interviewee noted that such diversity had not yet been achieved in the ICRC. Informal collaborative meetings or discussions seemed to be limited predominantly to ICRC staff members. Most of the respondents, 49 out of 74 (66%), stated that no managers from outside the ICRC participated in these meetings or discussions, and only 7% (5 out of 74) stated that external participation happened often. Further to the literature review, one could conclude that collaboration and partnerships within, as well as outside organisations, are crucial for the survival and competitiveness of organisations today (Agranoff, 2008; Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999; Verkoren, 2010). This could potentially lead to the reduced autonomy of an organisation (Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999). However, ignoring this topic and failing to incorporate it within organisational policy and practice leads to missing out on knowledge (Milligan, Littlejohn and Margaryan, 2014) and to reduced adaptability to today's complexity and dynamism (Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999). Communities of practice can be very helpful, by bringing together very diverse members with a common purpose.

The perceived risk of losing autonomy as a result of forming partnerships and networking beyond organisational borders is related to the larger topic of organisational culture. Organisational culture can be seen as linked to Wenger's early understanding of the shared repertoire of a community

of practice (1998). With the exception of the use of professional jargon, there was no particular culture, such as following ceremonies, rituals, signs etc. during informal meetings and discussions, beyond general organisational culture, as stated by most of the participants. General organisational culture, however, seems to play an essential role in the ICRC, as was emphasised many times in the study, from focus group discussion, through comments in the survey questionnaire, to the in-depth interviews. The humanitarian principles and the specificities of the job appear to have a strong bonding effect, including creating a sense of “community belonging”, already potentiated by the mere fact of being an ICRC employee. “The ICRC is already a learning community, visiting prisons is a profession in the ICRC only”, an interviewee said. The other two of the core dimensions of communities of practice, joint enterprise (having a common identity and mutual accountability with one another) and mutual engagement (working on a common class of problems) are echoed in this statement (Wenger, 1998). On the other hand, this was also associated by some respondents, both in the questionnaire and in the interviews, with perpetuating hierarchical dependency. A survey respondent noted in the comments section, that there is a “Swiss/European bias” and a “top-down approach” driven by Headquarters. Active participation was expected, “but not too much”, an interviewee shared. In the provided comment section in the survey questionnaire, a respondent noted “there is the attitude of remaining supportive, everyone to be heard”. However, the respondent added, this was “not necessarily leading to change, especially in relation to opinions expressed by locally hired managers”. This response thus alluded again to differences among expatriate and locally-hired staff, and to the need for improving the managerial culture. People should feel that their opinion is genuinely valued, appreciated and taken into consideration.

Organisational culture, due to its deep-rooted values, seems to be most resistant to change (Bezjian, Holmstrom, and Kipley 2009). For instance, some authors argue that values, such as respect for beneficiaries as well as independence and impartiality of action, are particularly strong in the humanitarian sector (Walker and Russ, 2011). Values did emerge as a theme in the interviews. In particular, one interviewee was “worried that in our pursuit of professionalism we will lose our souls”.

Strong organisational culture could be seen on one side as inspiring and motivating, and on the other, as limiting. For an organisation to survive in today's reality, the influence of organisational culture may have to be reduced (Bezjian, Holmstrom, and Kipley, 2009). The right balance should be found, between keeping some traditional practices, while stimulating expansive ways of thinking and acting (Harris and Shelswell, 2005). For an organisation to thrive in today's world, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation, or learning and innovation, should be at the centre of an organisation's values. The need to cross boundaries, and the need for inclusiveness and innovation, led Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) to change the three core dimensions of communities of practice, i.e. shared repertoire, joint enterprise and mutual engagement, simply to domain, community and practice. As discussed in Chapter 2, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) thus moved communities of practice from a relatively simpler approach related to "apprenticeship", towards the level of knowledge management and organisational development. Half of the interviewees felt that the culture of small communities, with relatively few members, was "positive", i.e. supportive and constructive, and characterised by openness and informality. "Might take years for results", an interviewee shared. Starting small and slowly building up a diverse community had been described in the literature as a way to cultivate a successful community of practice (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008).

Study results indicate that there is a positive disposition for learning among the survey respondents. Most of them, 42 out of 69 (61%), stated that they engaged both in collective learning and individual further education during informal meetings and discussions. Those who engaged in collaborative and individual learning were statistically more likely to be in the group, which felt part of a learning community of managers ( $p\text{-value}=0.002$ ), as well as in the group, which agreed with the statement that they were part of an organisation-wide learning community ( $p\text{-value}=0.026$ ), as shown in table 6. Most respondents agreed that participants in the informal meetings or discussions were open to new ideas and ready to collaborate with others, both inside and outside the ICRC (64 out of 72, 89%). On the other hand, for now, the latter was not the case in practice. The informal meetings

Table 6: Informal collaborative learning, comparison between groups, Fisher's exact test.

Variable	Not part of LCM*, n=25 n	Part of LC, n=47 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value	Not part of OLC*, n=22 n	Part of OLC, n=51 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value
<b>Where/how do the informal meetings/discussions take place?</b>						
<b>In person, n=82</b>			0.531			0.079*
Not apply	1	0		1	0	
Sometimes apply	1	2		2	1	
Apply	23	45		19	50	
<b>On-line, n=82</b>			0.432			0.412
Not apply	0	0		0	0	
Sometimes apply	6	16		5	18	
Apply	19	31		17	33	
<b>Teleconference, n=81</b>			0.123			0.161
Not apply	9	7		8	9	
Sometimes apply	7	21		8	18	
Apply	9	19		6	24	
<b>E-mail, n=81</b>			0.221			0.628
Not apply	2	0		1	2	
Sometimes apply	2	6		3	4	
Apply	21	41		18	45	
<b>On line forum, n=81</b>			0.863			0.860
Not apply	15	24		13	28	
Sometimes apply	8	19		8	18	
Apply	2	4		1	5	
<b>Participants in the informal meetings/discussions, n=77</b>			0.194			0.564
Various departments, different sites	5	10		3	12	
Same department, one site	2	3		2	4	
Various departments, one site	12	11		9	14	
Same department, different sites	6	20		6	19	
<b>Participants from outside the ICRC in informal meetings/discussions, n=74</b>			0.267			0.774
Never	19	26		14	34	
Sometimes	5	15		7	13	
<b>Topics discussed in meetings/discussions</b>						
<b>Function specific, n=84</b>			0.032*			0.529
No	9	6		3	12	
Yes	16	41		19	39	
<b>Team management, n=84</b>			0.457			0.072*
No	9	22		6	27	
Yes	16	25		16	24	
<b>Staff learning, n=84</b>			0.617			0.440
No	16	26		15	29	
Yes	9	21		7	22	
<b>Shared values, directed to staff member learning in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>			0.183			0.279
No	6	5		5	6	
Yes	19	40		15	42	
<b>Monitoring of the progress of staff member learning in informal meetings/discussions, n=67</b>			0.428			0.01*
No	10	14		12	12	
Yes	13	29		7	34	
<b>Engaging in learning together and individual further learning in informal meetings/discussions, n=69</b>			0.002*			0.026*
No	16	11		12	15	
Yes	9	32		7	33	

Variable	Not part of LCM*, n=25 n	Part of LC, n=47 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value	Not part of OLC*, n=22 n	Part of OLC, n=51 n	Fisher's exact test, p-value
<b>Discussion of new ideas in informal meetings/discussions, n=72</b>			0.424			1.000
No	4	4		2	6	
Yes	19	43		19	42	
<b>Diversity of participants in informal meetings/discussions, n=73</b>			0.126			0.794
Diverse	13	32		14	32	
Similar	12	13		8	16	
<b>Challenge and support each other in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>			0.036*			0.719
No	7	4		4	7	
Yes	16	41		16	41	
<b>Distinct culture or practice in informal meetings/discussions, n=66</b>			1.000			0.240
No	21	34		14	40	
Yes	2	5		3	4	
Other	0	1		1	0	
<b>Change and change management discussed in informal meetings/discussions, n=63</b>			0.016*			1.000
No	10	6		5	11	
Yes	12	33		15	30	
<b>Leadership in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>			0.031*			0.773
No	6	5		3	8	
One person	14	21		10	25	
Several persons	3	19		8	14	
<b>Duration over time of the informal meetings/discussions, n=62</b>			0.114			0.015*
Project duration	9	14		4	20	
<2 year	10	10		7	13	
>2 years	3	14		10	6	

\*LCM, learning community of managers; OLC, organisation-wide learning community

or discussions, as mentioned above, were largely limited to intra-organisational participation. Challenge and trust were identified in the literature review as the driving force for knowledge creation and development. Challenge, a proxy for conflict, and support, a proxy for trust and respect, are grounded in dialectics, characterising the entire learning process (Daniels, Cole and Wertsch, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). These are among the 'softest' characteristics of a learning community, being more difficult to develop and to measure. Sixty out of 71 (85%) of all respondents agreed that managers in informal meetings or discussions challenged each other while remaining supportive. Those respondents were statistically more likely to be in the group that felt part of a learning community of managers (p-value=0.036). The results from the interviews supported a somewhat different perspective on this question. Only one interviewee stated that conflict is addressed through debate.

Another three interviewees agreed that if there are rules, people can agree to disagree, and if they are also willing to engage in negotiation and compromise, conflict could be managed productively. On the other hand, on a more subtle level, five of six interviewees were less positive on this topic. One interviewee felt that conflict was usually addressed in the “old style”, referring to the hierarchy and top-down culture in the organisation, and said that especially with participants from Headquarters, “alternative opinions might be dismissed”. Another interviewee said that “many times the problem is not addressed, even if the problem is clear”, and yet another one thought that conflict can be addressed with set rules. Two other interviewees felt that one of the reasons for relatively limited conflict in the organisation was that people still normally did not express very different opinions. This corroborates the ALNAP (2008) report on organisational culture in the humanitarian sector, which, as discussed earlier, stated that consensus was the most common decision-making mechanism, preventing the discussions required for change processes. It appears thus that truly expansive ways of learning are yet to be fully adopted by the organisation.

Supporting the above summary, 60 out of 71 respondents (85%) stated that they shared values directed to staff member learning in informal meetings or discussions. In addition, 43 out of 67 respondents (64%) stated that there is monitoring of the progress of staff member learning in informal meetings or discussions. Respondents who monitored the progress of their staff were statistically significantly more likely to be in the group that agreed with the statement that they felt part of an organisation-wide learning community ( $p\text{-value}=0.01$ ). An interviewee suggested that monitoring creates a sense of support on the receiving end, and is closely linked with coaching, as well as with reflection on practice. Reflection, on the other hand, can be seen as a tool for continuous evaluation of outcomes.

Defining objectives and following up on achievements on a regular basis with line-managers was listed among the informal learning modes in the ICRC by focus group participants. Beattie (2006) argued that line-manager involvement in workplace learning includes challenging staff, putting goals,



letting people make mistakes and treating people with respect, thus corroborating adult learning principles. Shared values, on the other hand, is the first characteristic of professional learning communities (Bolam et al., 2005), contributing to learning. It is often seen as a core management function, and is part of ICRC managers' responsibilities (ICRC, 2012b). These strong results (85% shared values for staff learning) are interpreted as an indicator for positive perception of informal collaborative learning among ICRC staff members, which could be developed further to include the whole organisation.

Complementing the above results, 47 out of 63 respondents (75%) stated that change is addressed in informal meetings or discussions. However, in the related comments section, respondents elaborated that change discussed is mainly technical, "change in terms of humanitarian response, but rarely a discussion will talk about management change in terms of development". In this respect, 61 out of 84 respondents (73%) stated that function-specific topics are being discussed during informal meetings or discussions, corroborating the outcome of an earlier report on this topic in the humanitarian sector (ALNAP, 2008). Only half of the respondents stated that team management is being discussed and even fewer, i.e. one third, said that staff learning was discussed (more than one answer was possible for this question). Respondents stating that function-specific topics were discussed during informal meetings or discussions had a statistically significant higher chance of being in the group feeling part of a learning community of managers (p-value=0.032). A similar trend, but from the opposite perspective, was observed as well: participants who did not discuss team management issues in informal meetings or discussions were in the group that agreed with the statement about being part of an organisation-wide learning community (p-value=0.072). Given that the surveyed population consisted exclusively of managers, it could have been expected that one of the prevalent topics of discussion would be team management. The opposite finding of this study can be explained with the strong organisational culture existing in the ICRC and an enduring top down approach. An interviewee specified further: "There is absolutely not even awareness, let alone

knowledge, of what change management is. ICRC managers focus on change content and ignore change processes”.

However, four interviewees thought that, in times of change and thus uncertainty, a more or less permanent state in today’s ever-changing environment, staff members have to be more included in discussions. In such instances, the concept of learning communities could offer a positive forum for staff members, providing a safe space for ideas to emerge and be discussed freely. One interviewee said that, given such concerns, “if these learning communities were in place, I think people could express themselves, and maybe there would be some great ideas that would come out”. All this corroborates Johnson (2007), who described communities of practice as safe learning spaces, based on trust and agreed rules. Communities of practice can help not-for-profit organisations to disseminate and implement solutions to complex problems (Murray and Carter, 2005).

Proper management is essential for the work of communities of practice (Bolam et al., 2005; McDermott and Archibald, 2010; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Most participants, 59 out of 71 (83%), agreed that there is leadership in informal meetings or discussions. Most of the time, one person was in charge of meetings or discussions; yet “collective” facilitation was not exceptional either. The idea of collective facilitation was supported by two of the interviewees as well. Those respondents who participated in informal meetings or discussions with “collective” facilitation, were more likely to be in the group of people who considered themselves as part of a learning community of managers. Leading, or rather facilitating, a community of practice, is different from leading a team. During the interviews, leadership was discussed more generally, with terms such as ‘vision’ and ‘competence’ repeated quite often. An interviewee clarified that the “leader” of the informal group is rather a “moderator, reminding others of the objective”. Another interviewee spoke about “natural leaders, emerging in small groups”. A third interviewee suggested that the leader of an organisation-wide learning community should be the President or the Director General of the organisation. These findings of the study somewhat corroborate the discussion of the literature, which stated that

communities of practice should be managed “strategically” and focus on issues important to the organisation in order to stay relevant (McDermott and Archibald, 2010). The right balance should be found between the “management” of a community of practice and the encouragement of spontaneous collaboration in the group.

The development of managerial capabilities of leaders and or facilitators is crucial (Beattie, 2006; Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley, 2009; Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2017). Soft skills, including being challenging and supportive, stimulating communication, promoting inclusion of diversity and creating an environment of trust, are becoming more valued qualities of managers and facilitators, and take time to develop (Beattie, 2006; Bolam et al., 2005; Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999; Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2017; Visser et al., 2016). There is a further discussion in the literature regarding what would be the best background for a facilitator. A general facilitator might not become involved enough in the community’s work; on the other hand, a facilitator-practitioner or specialist runs the risk of dominating the work of the community (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). A possible solution to this dilemma could be co-facilitation as originally proposed by Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) to address facilitation fatigue, which would further allow for using more diverse competences.

In addition to the facilitation of the specific community of practice, supportive leadership at the organisational level is essential for the development of thriving communities of practice in an organisation. As already discussed, this is one of the key processes, listed by Bolam et al. (2005), for developing a professional learning community. Before starting to cultivate a community of practice, Wagenaar and Hulsebosch (2008) first ensured the support of senior management of their organisation. The importance of a supportive organisational culture for organisational learning had been emphasised for decades (Argyris, 1976). As knowledge is essential for organisations, organisational leadership should be aware of the concept of knowledge management, the benefits for the organisation from knowledge management, and how to integrate it within the organisation

(Agranoff, 2008; Bezjian, Holmstrom and Kipley, 2009; Higgins, 2007) . Organisational leadership for organisational learning was not assessed directly in this study. However, especially the qualitative component of the study showed a strong organisational culture. It was generally seen as a positive element, in particular with respect to humanitarian values and smaller learning communities. On the other hand, in bigger groups and at organisational level, it was also seen as perpetuating a strong hierarchy and a certain measure of top down approach, in particular from Headquarters. The organisation, it seems, is yet to address these issues on the path of becoming a learning organisation.

The average length of existence of these informal meetings or discussions varied. An approximately equal number of respondents stated that the encounters continued as long as the project continued, or for a period of a year or two, and a smaller number for longer periods of time. Respondents working on a specific project in the informal meetings or discussions were statistically significantly more likely to be part of the group, which agreed with the statement that managers in the ICRC form an organisation-wide learning community ( $p\text{-value}=0.015$ ). This was also confirmed by all participants in the qualitative interviews, with some interviewees speaking of the greater focus and mastery made possible by project work, and the feeling that “the whole project is a learning experience”, supporting a good learning atmosphere. In addition, working on a project created the opportunity to work in a more diverse team, have more freedom and be more creative, as well as see one’s work through from beginning to end.

The question of the duration of informal meetings can be linked to the discussion in the literature on the “life” and different stages in the development of a community of practice. A community of practice does not have fixed structures, and is designed for evolution (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). A community of practice may stop existing after the completion of a task around which it had been formed (project duration), and exist for a few months or years and “die” or transform into a new form (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). Stackman, Henderson and Bloch (2006) point out the need for further research in this regard. This dynamic “life” of

communities of practice can be seen as reflecting the life of complex adaptive systems, and thus, as the most natural way to respond to the complex and dynamic contexts of today's work.

#### 4.4. Learning communities

The learning questionnaire did not offer any detailed definition of what exactly was meant by "discussions and meetings", in order to capture the widest possible understanding of such among participants. As already noted, the term "community of practice" was not used either. However, judging by the definition given by the interviewees, when asked to define the term "learning community", it could be concluded that participants in the study had a good understanding of it. Taking elements from the various responses given by interviewees, learning communities were defined as a diverse group of people, outside the normal working team, who share freely new ideas and experiences to learn together and achieve certain goals.

The last two questions summarised the above discussion on informal collaborative learning, by asking the respondents whether in the meetings or discussions a "group" or "community" was formed and whether this "community" could be extended to the whole organisation, thus linking to the concept of the learning organisation. Most of the respondents, 47 out of 72 (65%), agreed that a group or community was formed in the meetings and discussions. Seventy percent, 51 out of 73 respondents, agreed that managers in the ICRC are part of an organisation-wide learning community. However, about one third of the respondents, who felt part of a learning community of managers, did not feel part of an organisation-wide learning community. Conversely, about one third of those who agreed with the statement that ICRC managers formed an organisation-wide learning community, did not agree that, during informal meetings or discussions, a kind of a community was formed (Table 7).

Table 7. Learning community of managers and organisation-wide learning community.

	Managers, as part of organisation-wide learning community		
Forming a community during informal meetings/discussions	No	Yes	Total
No	8	17	25
Yes	14	31	45
Total	22	48	70

In summary, less than half of the respondents, 31 out of 70 (44%), who provided answers to both questions, thought that participating in informal collaborative meetings or discussions formed an informal group or community, which was also part of an organisation-wide learning community. This result supports the study of Neufeld, Fang and Wan (2013), in which most participants did not see the organisation as a whole to be a community of practice either. Rather, that study found that there were many small communities within, or extending beyond the boundaries of, the organisation. A respondent further said that the informal meetings or discussions were not well-defined in the organisation. “There are already many working groups in the ICRC, but they tend to be the same people over and over again”, an interviewee said. The development of fresh ideas and the diversity that could be achieved through such learning communities would be welcomed, that interviewee also added. Another interviewee suggested: “maybe you can have 20 working groups”, echoing Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) ideas of a constellation of communities, each contributing to a specific area of interest for the organisation.

#### 4.5. Conclusion and answer to research question 2

This section summarises the empirical findings of this study, aligned with the main elements of the conceptual framework of the study, and answers research question 2. In summary, learning by doing, coaching and mentoring, and an overall learning atmosphere were ranked as the most

important modes of learning in the ICRC. Meetings in person, real or virtual, were the primary way for conducting informal meetings or discussions. Online forums were not very common, however, if properly managed, most participants were ready to give more sophisticated forms of online collaboration a chance. Most of the respondents agreed that they engaged in learning together and in individual further education during informal meetings or discussions, and almost all agreed that they were open to new ideas and ready to collaborate with others, though change was generally confined to function-specific topics. Younger, locally-hired staff members, with less experience, seemed to be more interested in informal collaborative learning. Most participants shared values directed to staff member learning. The diversity of participants in informal meetings or discussions was limited to the organisation. External participation was rare. There seemed to be a strong organisational culture, somewhat supportive of a vertical hierarchy, and differences between expatriate and locally-hired staff still persisted. Smaller communities were generally thought to have a positive culture, more supportive and constructive. Some form of facilitation was essential for these informal collaborative learning groups. The qualitative in-depth interviews, as discussed above, highlighted most of these findings. Some interviewees had never heard the term “learning community”, however, in the course of the study they realised that “it is all around us”. Others thought that the ICRC, because of the essence of its work, is already such a “learning community”.

These findings also support the outcome of the focus group discussion, pointing out the spontaneous formation of informal groups and “networks” among ICRC staff members, usually building on each other’s function-specific experience, occasionally coming up with new ideas, which could bring about function-related change. The formation of such relatively modest informal communities has been described in the literature (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006). As discussed in Chapter 2, communities of practice appear to represent a natural way of learning. Further cultivating spontaneous communities of practice may thus bring about even greater benefits in terms of learning and, ultimately, organisational output.

To answer the second research question, based on the empirical data collected for the study, ICRC staff members seem to recognise and value highly different opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the organisation. The promotion of communities of practice has been part of work-based learning policies of the ICRC for quite some time already, as discussed in Chapter 1 (ICRC, 2008a). The data show that there already are communities of practice in the ICRC. However, the informal learning groups existing in the organisation seem to be poorly defined, with limited membership. Less than half of the participants in the study felt part of a learning community of managers and part of an organisation-wide learning community at the same time; only somewhat more than half thought that they engaged in individual or collaborative learning during informal meetings or discussions, and many participants did not think that discussions during informal meetings led to change, with change being the most important product and goal, at the same time, of learning. There seem to be many “unmet needs” in the ICRC in the area of informal collaborative learning. Further research is required in this area, both theoretical and applied.

How can these informal communities, spontaneously formed around function-specific matters, be fostered to become the drivers of knowledge creation in the organisation? How does this translate into knowledge capture and knowledge creation at organisational level?

#### 4.6. Recommendations and answer to research question 3

Throughout the thesis the argument was supported that informal collaborative practices, supported by modern technology, can be seen as a tool for work-based learning. They are essential for knowledge creation in organisations, and therefore for the survival and competitiveness of organisations in today’s dynamic environment. Building on the empirical data collected for this study, and complementing it with the literature review conducted for this research, the thesis concludes with three general practical recommendations, aligned with the main elements of the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. These recommendations are intended as suggestions to improve



and foster informal collaborative learning in the ICRC, and thus address the third research question. Figure 12 represents graphically these recommendations by recalling the three overlapping circles of figure 9, denoting the fluidity and interaction between the recommendations.

*Figure 12. Recommendations for fostering communities of practice in the ICRC.*



First, organisational leadership and organisational culture should be addressed. The development of a learning community requires the “active support of leadership at all levels” (Bolam et al., 2005). Not all policymakers will support the development of such communities, as it involves major changes in organisational culture (Fullan, 2007). Organisational culture appears to be most resistant to change (Bezjian, Holmstrom, and Kipley, 2009). Communities of practice benefit from more horizontal structures (Kerno, 2008). This study did not assess directly organisational leadership for organisational learning. However, the qualitative component of the study highlighted a still prevailing vertical hierarchical structure with a somewhat top-down approach. According to the literature, vertical structures can be managed through action learning and genuine inclusion of diverse or marginal groups of employees (Johnson, 2007); through collective leadership with emphasis on practice and less emphasis on individual leaders (Raelin, 2016); and through the introduction of organisational structures, such as knowledge management forums (Guldborg et al., 2013). The importance of informal learning for staff member learning and knowledge creation should be well

acknowledged at all levels in the organisation, and fostered. “Managing knowledge in organizations is fundamentally about creating an environment in the organization that is conducive to and encourages knowledge creation, sharing and use” (Choo and de Alvarenga Neto, 2010, p.592). Informal collaborative learning can be further encouraged by organisational leadership by providing adequate resources, the most important of which are “time” and “space” (Bolam et al., 2005). The lack of time for engaging in e-learning, for instance, was mentioned by many respondents in the qualitative assessment of this study. In terms of space, given the trend of merging levels of physical and virtual reality described earlier (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008), a crucial process will involve the setting up and development of a reliable and interactive online environment. Most authors agree that communities of practice need relatively simple technology, providing a reliable connection of people (Huysman and Wulf, 2005; McDermott and Archibald, 2010). However, rapid advances in technology, in particular in the field of artificial intelligence, also suggest a future in which technology will play a much bigger role than simply connecting people or storing knowledge, possibly as member, or even as facilitator, of a community of practice (Huang, 2002; Luckin et al., 2016).

Second, communities of practice need cultivation (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Starting small, developing over time, cultivating many communities within the organisation, was suggested by the study participants, as well as in the literature (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). On the one hand, the spontaneous formation of communities of practice and the informality of group learning is one of their strongest sides. On the other hand, in order to stay relevant to the organisation, communities of practice need some management. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) proposed the development of public events for community members, as well as one-to-one community spaces in the initial stages of cultivating a community. As noted during the focus group discussion, the formation of informal learning groups in the ICRC was usually stimulated after an organised course or a departmental meeting. This should be further encouraged by course facilitators and team leaders. Managers should be really involved, however, they should be neither authoritative nor directive (McDermott and Archibald, 2010). Team leaders can be seen rather

as expert practitioners (Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Bezjian, Holmstrom, and Kipley (2009) also suggest the development of project and cross-functional teams in organisations. In future, drawing the line between informal collaborative groups for knowledge sharing, knowledge application and knowledge creation on one side, and cross-functional teams, as part of the organisational structure on the other, might not be straightforward. As discussed in Chapter 2, cultivated communities of practice might not only be the most natural learning tool and knowledge creation tool for an organisation, but perhaps also at the base of future organisational structures. Some organisations have already been partially functioning this way (Ticoll, 2004). To complete the cultivation of communities of practice, an important element is that of monitoring and evaluating the work and the value of the community (Neagu, 2013; Wenger, Beverley, De Laat, 2011). This was not assessed here due to the exploratory character of the study.

Third, diversity is essential for knowledge creation in a group. It is stimulating, brings more learning and better adaptability to organisations (Higgins, 2007). Diversity ensures freshness and difference in a group, as long as all members are given a chance to participate (Malone and Bernstein, 2015; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch, 2008). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) recommend different levels of participation, based on the interests and the commitment of members. Creating membership criteria can be limiting and contribute to the failure of the community, as demonstrated by Venters and Wood (2007). In support of diversity, Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins (1999) suggest that frontline staff should be involved in the strategic planning of organisations and adopt more expansive ways of learning and working. Technological solutions, such as knowledge base repositories, can be very helpful in case of high staff turnover.

In terms of diversity, as discussed, the ICRC has already introduced a new administrative policy, aiming at providing equal chances and opportunities for staff with equal competences (ICRC, 2012b). The data for this study indicates that improvements still need to be made in the organisation in this direction. As noted earlier, the inclusion of all staff members, younger and older, expatriates

and locally-hired, will benefit knowledge creation in the organisation. Different cultural-historical and educational backgrounds may make the process of collaborative learning more difficult (Rohde et al., 2007). Diversity is also related to trust, as it might be easier to trust people similar to oneself (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). Nevertheless, diversity stimulates innovation and creativity, as well as better learning outcomes. It is perhaps one of the best safeguards against some of the weaknesses of communities of practice, such as the temptation of ownership and the formation of cliques (Chua, 2002; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

What better place to start embracing diversity than international humanitarian organisations, whose workforces come from, and travel all over, the globe? In the literature review it was argued that international humanitarian organisations, with diverse human capital, working in diverse and dynamically changing contexts, appear to have all the characteristics of knowledge-creating and learning organisations (Neagu, 2013). The promotion of diversity has to be genuine. Active encouragement of diversity will contribute to organisational culture change. Communities of practice can be the means for aiding the emergence of an expansive organisational culture. Arguably diversity thus becomes one of the most important tools for knowledge creation. Participants in the informal meetings or discussions studied here were perceived as diverse; however, diversity was limited to the organisation. External participation was not frequent with less than 10% of participants stating that it is occurring often.

In addition, for cultivating successful communities of practice in the ICRC, the community has to expand outside the organisation, by building on inter-organisational networks and partnerships (Offenheiser, Holcombe and Hopkins, 1999; Verkoren, 2010; Agranoff, 2008). Not addressing this possible experience would lead to missing out on opportunities for the organisation (Milligan, Littlejohn and Margaryan, 2014). Partnerships could be agreed on with various external stakeholders, including other organisations, both local and international, public or private; as well as with donors, interlocutors, beneficiaries; and universities. Based on the literature review, organisations have to

dedicate time, skills and funding for research (Russel et al., 2011; Verkoren, 2010). The development of research, with or without partnerships with universities, will secure the role of the organisation in international debates, policymaking, global knowledge exchanges and advocacy.

Interactions should be continuous and multidirectional, mutually influencing each other. The ICRC has made the pursuit of partnerships part of its official operational strategy (ICRC, 2014b), yet establishing such partnerships may take time. Communities of practice can be a tool for the fast development of external partnerships. For confidentiality reasons of organisational data privacy and security, it might be difficult to imagine accepting external stakeholders as full active members of an ICRC community of practice. The right balance should be found between keeping to the specificities of the work-related organisational culture and embracing opportunities for knowledge sharing and creation.

In summary, and in answer to the third research question, communities of practice need cultivation, and need to be recognised and fostered by the organisation as a tool for knowledge creation. They should be based on inclusiveness and diversity, leading to innovation and thus the adaptability of the organisation to today's dynamically changing environment.

## Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

The chapter summarises the main findings in relation to the three research questions. Next, the contribution of the study to the literature and practice is discussed. Finally, the chapter, and thus the thesis, is completed with an outline of areas of interest for future research.

In the beginning of this thesis the question was asked as to how organisations survive in today's volatile and dynamically changing contexts around the world? How do they keep up to date, compete and develop? Several elements were identified from the literature review that are relevant for the ICRC in the future. These include an organisational focus on learning, knowledge sharing and new knowledge creation, cultivating expansive ways of thinking, collaborative approaches and learning to see the whole. The concept of communities of practice was introduced, and its evolution over the years described, from apprenticeship-like learning for professional development to a technology-driven knowledge creation tool, supporting organisational competitiveness and development.

### 5.1. Summary of the main findings

The study addressed three research questions.

First, how can informal collaborative learning, as a tool for work-based learning in international humanitarian organisations, be conceptualised? Based on Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's (2002) definition of communities of practice and complementing it with further perspectives on the concept from the literature, it was argued that communities of practice, supported by modern ICT, are at the centre of knowledge management in an organisation. Thus, communities of practice, and other forms of informal collaborative learning, appear to be essential for the competitiveness of organisations in today's dynamic contexts. International humanitarian organisations, working in diverse and dynamically changing contexts with diverse and dynamically changing staff, have all the

characteristics to adopt such expansive approaches to learning and work. However, it appears that most organisations have not yet reached that stage in practice.

An empirical exploratory assessment of how informal collaborative learning is perceived among ICRC employees was done in response to the second research question. Empirical data was collected through a cross-sectional, mixed methods assessment, including a focus group discussion, a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Based on the empirical data, there seemed to be a strong organisational culture, somewhat supportive of vertical hierarchies, and still prevailing differences between expatriate and locally-hired staff in relation to learning and development, with locally-hired managers feeling significantly more often part of an organisation-wide learning community. Nevertheless, ICRC staff members seemed to recognise and highly value different opportunities for informal collaborative learning in the organisation. Informal learning groups existing in the organisation seem to be poorly defined and to have limited membership. Less than half of the participants in the study felt part of a learning community of managers and part of an organisation-wide learning community at the same time; and only somewhat more than half thought that they engaged in individual or collaborative learning during informal meetings or discussions. Many participants did not think that discussions during informal meetings led to change. Change was seen as the most important product and, at the same time, goal, of learning. This was interpreted as persistent unmet needs in the organisation in the area of informal collaborative practices.

Finally, in response to the third research question, the thesis concluded with recommendations for establishing successful communities of practice in the ICRC, as a tool for work-based learning, with the purpose of encouraging learning and knowledge creation at individual, collective and organisational levels in the process of the ICRC becoming a humanitarian learning organisation. Data from the empirical assessment were aligned with the literature review and thus helped to address the third research question. In brief, communities of practice need to be recognised and supported by the leadership of the organisation as a tool for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. Communities of practice benefit from more horizontal organisational structures.

Communities of practice need to be “cultivated”. They should be based on inclusiveness and diversity, and reach beyond organisational boundaries. They lead to innovation and thus to the adaptability of the organisation to today’s dynamically changing environment. Appearing to play an essential role in terms of competitiveness of the organisation, communities of practice can be seen as having a dual function, on one hand as a knowledge management tool in organisations, and, on the other, in future, perhaps as the possible base structure of the organisation itself.

## 5.2. Contribution to the literature and practice

This thesis provides several major contributions to the literature and practice.

To answer the first research question, a systematic literature review was conducted, by searching four subject-relevant research databases, using the EBSCOhost online reference system with search terms used for informal collaborative learning, in relation to humanitarian, nongovernmental, not-for-profit and volunteer organisations. The search included peer reviewed original studies. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, this is the first systematic literature review on communities of practice and other forms of informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations, thus filling a gap in an under-researched area.

The systematic literature review found that the literature on more informal collaborative types of learning in international humanitarian organisations is still very scarce. The research in only six of the 23 included studies, which were relevant to the topic of informal collaborative learning in international humanitarian organisations, had been conducted in international humanitarian organisations. In addition, no study was found directly researching the start and development of a community of practice or other related forms of informal collaborative learning in an international humanitarian organisation. The empirical data collected for this study, in the form of a quantitative survey complemented by a qualitative assessment, provide substantial information on informal collaborative learning in the ICRC. This data would be essential background for any future research in



the organisation in this field. In addition, other international humanitarian organisations can benefit from it as well. For instance, it could be applied to comparative studies, especially because of the scarcity of the literature.

One particular area, on which information is not readily available in the literature, is demographics. Data was gathered on age and gender, as well as on educational level, contractual status, staff under supervision, years in management, and department in the organisation. As discussed in the Results and Discussion chapter, this data returned some associations with important consequences on recommendations in terms of the inclusion of all staff members, be they younger or older, expatriates or locally hired, for fostering the development of informal collaborative learning in the organisation. One of the main findings of this study, e.g. that locally-hired managers are feeling significantly more often part of an organisation-wide learning community in comparison to expatriates, should be well integrated in organisational policies. Locally-hired staff can be seen as the driving force behind change in the organisation. The power of locally-hired staff to shape organisational learning and culture should be recognised and used to bring the organisation to the next level of learning and development.

The results of the empirical study, based on the specificities of international humanitarian organisations, aligned with the literature review, led to several recommendations for cultivating a successful community of practice in the ICRC. These recommendations could broadly be applied to other international humanitarian organisations, due consideration given to their own specific contexts. Indeed, the review of the literature did not find a single study on cultivation of communities of practice in international humanitarian organisations. The literature recognises the potential of international humanitarian organisations for becoming knowledge-creating learning organisations (Neagu, 2013), as well as the importance of the development of communities of practice in this respect (Za, Spagnoletti and North-Samardzic, 2014). Organisational culture is of critical importance in relation to learning and development opportunities in organisations. Communities of practice thrive in more horizontal organisational structures and need to be fostered by the leadership of the organisation as

a tool for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. Conversely, such learning and development opportunities, by promoting diversity, inclusiveness and innovation, will play an important role in reshaping this organisational culture in a way that better promotes informal learning and knowledge sharing across the organisation.

Finally, as already noted in the methods chapter, the discussion of informal types of collaborative learning at individual (questionnaire, in-depth interviews) or group levels (focus group discussion) could itself help to facilitate participants' awareness of the issues relating to the importance of communities of practice. One of the strongest characteristics of communities of practice is their informality and self-organisation. Raising the importance of such modes of learning possibly could even stimulate action on participants' part. An interviewee reflected that this is the first time he heard the phrase 'learning community'. However, during the study, he had realised that learning communities were "all around us", how much he had learned and how he had survived from the beginning, and how he had become successful at a later stage.

### 5.3. Future perspectives and how the study has shaped my own work in the organisation

The empirical data collected for this study showed that communities of practice in the ICRC are still at an early initial stage of maturity, small and "not well-defined". Their potential as a knowledge management tool seems to be underused, and somewhat overshadowed by a strong organisational culture. At the same time, the literature on communities of practice demonstrates their essential role as a knowledge management tool, ensuring the survival and competitiveness of organisations in today's dynamically changing environment, and even possibly as base of future organisational structures. This gap between the role that communities of practice can play in an organisation and the reality on the ground in the ICRC opens continuous perspectives for future research in the ICRC, as well as beyond the boundaries of the organisation.

As noted in Chapter 3, one of the limitations of the study was that it included only managers. In this regard, first, further exploratory research should be inclusive of all staff members, and not limited only to managers in order to garner as wide a range of opinions as possible from all staff members in the organisation. Likewise, research can be extended to the inter-organisational level, allowing for comparisons and thus further learning among organisations.

Second, an additional area of research can be action research with actively facilitating the cultivation of communities of practice within and outside the organisation, with the active support of the top management of the organisation, blended with modern technology, either as a tool or even as an active community member in the near future. Communities of practice can be focused in any area of interest for the organisation – from how to cultivate a community of practice through addressing function-specific and management issues, to conducting research. This will allow for further longitudinal studies, assessing how perceptions change over time. A comparative study will be of interest, evaluating the benefits of communities of practice with and without active facilitation and management for individual and organisational learning. As discussed in Chapter 2, McDermott and Archibald (2010) recommend the strategic management of communities of practice. In this respect, empirical studies show successful examples both of communities of practice without active facilitation (Stackman, Henderson and Bloch, 2006), and with active facilitation (Jansen, Cammock and Conner, 2010; Russel et al., 2011; Wagenaar and Hulsebosch 2008).

This leads to another important area of research, which was not addressed in this thesis, i.e. measuring and evaluating the work of communities of practice and other informal collaborative groups of learning. As noted in previous chapters, instruments for knowledge management evaluation are being developed and, in some cases, put into practice in the last few years. Monitoring and evaluation have to be part of strategic planning, in particular as they can be directly linked to outcome, learning and development. Such measures can be powerful learning tools, demonstrating achievements and successes on one side, and pointing out what further steps for learning should be undertaken on the other. Monitoring and evaluation are also closely related to research. As discussed,

organisations have to dedicate time, skills and funding for intra- and inter-organisational research. This would strengthen the position of the organisation in the international and dynamic context of today's environment, and would lead to further learning and development of the organisation through blending theory and practice, formal and informal learning, and technology and humanity.

My own awareness of the crucial role of informal collaborative learning practices for organisational learning and development took shape and grew significantly over the years of working on this project. I gradually came to understand the immense potential and power of such learning opportunities for shaping organisational learning culture and the organisation itself. I have started translating my research into practice by encouraging the creation of communities of practice within my team and beyond, and have joined informal collaborative groups beyond my extended team. In addition to offering better learning opportunities for all staff members, improved informal collaboration within internal and external learning communities will allow for better adaptation to change and for embracing change. It will no doubt also lead to better awareness of security concerns throughout the organisation, and to positive developments in the humanitarian impact on beneficiaries.

In conclusion, communities of practice and other forms of informal collaborative learning should play an essential role in international humanitarian organisations, in particular in relation to their competitiveness, and even their survival, in today's dynamic context. International humanitarian organisations appear to have all the characteristics required to cultivate successful communities of practice; yet, in practice, this is rarely the case. In the age of self-directed learning and rising artificial intelligence, communities of practice are the perfect tool for creating and sharing the kind of learning based on experience, which is so essential for humanitarians. The aspiring humanitarian learning organisation should therefore aim to cultivate inclusive, diverse, innovative and adaptable knowledge-creating technology-driven communities of practice as tools for work-based learning.

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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1. Focus group discussion informed consent form**

#### Invitation to participate in Research and Informed Consent

Dear Colleague,

I have selected you as an eligible participant in a pilot focus group discussion in the framework of my doctoral studies. Eligible participants are ICRC staff members, in charge of a team with at least one other team member for at least one year. They are stationed at the Bangkok delegation, and, in addition to being proficient in English, are available and willing to participate in this study. Furthermore, there should be no direct hierarchical link between any two participants. I would be very grateful if you could carefully read through the background information below and let me know by 23 May on which of the two proposed dates you would be available and agree to participate in this discussion. We will meet in the delegation's meeting room on either Thursday, 30 May (first choice) or on Tuesday, 4 June (second choice) at lunch time (12:00 PM). Pizza and soft drinks will be provided to all participants free of charge. The discussion should not last more than one hour.

If you agree to participate in this research, before we meet for the discussion, I kindly request you to print out this message and sign it at the bottom, and then to return that hard copy to me when we meet.

#### Background Information

##### **Learning at Work in the ICRC**

In addition to my functions at the ICRC, I am a part time EdD (Doctor of Education) student at the University of Bristol (UK), currently undertaking primary research for my dissertation. My studies are partially funded by the ICRC. I am interested in the practice of learning at work, and in particular how team leaders in the ICRC perceive the current reality of learning at work and their views on possible alternatives. This focus group discussion will help me develop a wider survey questionnaire. The research should help me gain an overview of current learning at work in the ICRC, and to form recommendations relevant to the ICRC and possibly other humanitarian organisations. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. No compensation will be paid for participation. While the ICRC is aware of this research and I have secured approval from the Learning and Development Division and the Regional Delegation in Bangkok, it is not a requirement of your employment to take part and you have a right to withdraw at any time.

##### **Record of discussions**

I will be keeping a digital audio recording of our discussion, securely stored in compliance with University of Bristol Information Handling and Information Security policies, and following the university's Research Guidelines and Regulations on Research Practice. There will be no copy of our discussion on ICRC equipment. The recording will not be shared with your hierarchy and you may review it and choose to omit anything that you are not comfortable with.

##### **Further information for research participants**

Participants agree to the following points about data collection and use:

- your personal contact details will only be kept on the researcher's University of Bristol mail account for the period of the research, and deleted upon completion of the research
- the focus group discussion will be recorded by the researcher after securing the agreement of all participants (see above)
- elements of the recording will be transcribed and may be included in the final submitted dissertation; participants have a right to refuse this
- all data presented in the dissertation will be anonymised including participants' names; no names will be used in connection with the data presented in the dissertation
- participants' names and contact details will not be passed on to any other parties without additional explicit written permission
- the researcher may wish to contact you again about the research after the focus group discussion, with your permission
- the researcher will endeavour to ensure that nothing is reproduced in the dissertation that could lead to participants being identified by name as the source
- If you have any questions about your rights as research participant or would like to lodge a complaint, please feel free to contact the Ethics Committee of the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education ([Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk) or [Wan.Yee@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Wan.Yee@bristol.ac.uk))
- participants are welcome to view the dissertation once it is finished on request to [j.c.landolt@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:j.c.landolt@bristol.ac.uk)

With many thanks,

J.Caspar Landolt  
 Head, ICRC Learning and Development Regional Unit Bangkok  
 20 Sukhumvit Road, Soi 4  
 Klongtoey  
 Bangkok 10110  
 Thailand  
 +66898125099  
[www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)



### **Informed consent form for all participants**

I have read the above text and agree with it in full. Having been informed of the purpose and procedures of this research, I understand that I have been asked for permission to record, store and analyse my opinions on learning at work in the ICRC. I understand that participation is voluntary and I am satisfied with the extent to which my confidentiality will be maintained.

I give my permission to Mr. J.Caspar Landolt to collect and store records of our discussion for the purposes of the research.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Please keep a copy of this form for future reference.

This informed consent form is based on Maidment-Otlet, R. (2010). *Letter of Consent and Information for Students*. University of Bristol doctoral research manuscript form.

## Appendix 2. Survey questionnaire

### LEARNING AT WORK IN THE ICRC

#### Background and informed consent

In addition to my functions at the ICRC, I am currently undertaking doctoral research in adult education at the University of Bristol (UK). My studies are partially funded by the ICRC.

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire about the practice of learning at work, and in particular about how team leaders in the ICRC perceive the current reality of learning at work. This survey should not take more than 15 minutes of your time.

All survey data are collected anonymously. All further data presented in the dissertation will be anonymised including participants' names; no names or email addresses will be used in connection with the data presented in the dissertation.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. No compensation will be paid for participation. Permission has been obtained for conducting this research.

If you have any questions about your rights as research participant, please feel free to contact the Ethics Committee of the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education (Frances.Giampapa@bristol.ac.uk or Wan.Yee@bristol.ac.uk).

Participants are welcome to view the dissertation once it is finished, on request.

#### Informed Consent

By answering this questionnaire, you agree to the above and give permission to Mr. J.Caspar Landolt to collect and store your replies for the purposes of the research.

1. I agree to the above and wish to continue

☐ Yes

☐ No

### Staff member learning

In this questionnaire, "staff member learning" refers to the professional development of all members of staff, whether they are in a management position or not.

2. In your view, how do the factors listed below contribute to staff member learning in the workplace?

	Contributes significantly	Somewhat contributes	Contributes minimally, if at all
Predominantly face-to-face training (classroom style courses)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning by doing, including through making mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A learning atmosphere promoted in the team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Peer groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workshops/seminars organised by the department	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual follow up, including coaching and mentoring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e-learning courses, exercises, webinars	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

--

3. Please rank the importance of the following factors of staff member learning, according to your experience in the ICRC, with 1 the most important, and 7 the least important. Note: please assign a value to each option individually.

\_\_ Learning by doing

\_\_ A learning atmosphere

\_\_ Peer groups

\_\_ Departmental workshops (at delegation, regional or headquarters level)

\_\_ Individual follow up (coaching, mentoring)

\_\_ e-learning

\_\_ Predominantly face-to-face training (for instance "Leading a Team")

### Collaborative learning

4. What is the primary forum for exchanges, discussions, or meetings for managers?

	Applies most	Applies	Applies sometimes	Does not apply
The managers meet in person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The managers meet online (Lync conference)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The managers meet by telephone conference	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The managers correspond through e-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The managers have a dedicated online forum	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)				

5. When you participate in such exchanges, discussions, or meetings, would you say that most other participants are:

- ☐ Managers from the same department/function in one site
- ☐ Managers from the same functional background in different sites
- ☐ Managers from different departments/functional backgrounds in one site
- ☐ Managers from different functional backgrounds in different sites
- ☐ Not applicable

6. In your experience, when you participate in such exchanges, do managers from outside the ICRC participate as well?

☐ No, never

☐ Yes, sometimes

☐ Yes, quite often

☐ Yes, always

☐ Not applicable

### Collaborative learning - characteristics

In this questionnaire, "staff member learning" refers to the professional development of all members of staff, whether they are in a management position or not.

7. What types of topics are usually addressed in such exchanges, discussions, or meetings (check all that apply)?

- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ The topics covered are function specific
- ☐ The topics covered include team management
- ☐ The topics covered include staff member learning
- ☐ Other (please specify)

8. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings share values directed to the learning of all staff members?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ No response

9. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings monitor and analyse the progress of staff members' learning, and set new learning goals if appropriate?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ No response

10. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings engage both in learning together and in individual further education?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ No response



11. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings are open to new ideas and ready to collaborate with others, both inside and outside the ICRC?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ No response

12. How diverse are the hierarchical levels, and the professional and educational backgrounds of managers participating in these exchanges, discussions and meetings?

- ☐ Very diverse from various levels and backgrounds
- ☐ Quite diverse from a few different levels and backgrounds
- ☐ Quite similar in terms of levels and backgrounds
- ☐ Very similar in terms of levels and backgrounds
- ☐ No response

13. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings challenge each other while remaining supportive of each other?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ No response

14. Would you say there is a particular distinct culture/practice apparent in the exchanges, discussions, and meetings of managers?

☐ Not applicable

☐ There is no particular, distinct culture/practice

☐ Yes, there is a distinct culture/practice displayed through signs or symbols (for instance a logo)

☐ Yes, there is a distinct culture/practice displayed through ceremonies or rituals

☐ Yes, the culture/practice is displayed in different ways

If you have answered yes, please feel free to explain further.

15. Do some of the exchanges, discussions or meetings address change and change management?

☐ Not applicable

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please feel free to explain further

### Leadership

16. Is there any apparent leadership in these exchanges, discussions, or meetings?

- ☐ No response
- ☐ One person is in charge and acknowledged as such
- ☐ Several persons/all participants exercise leadership
- ☐ There is no apparent leadership
- ☐ Other (please specify)

### Time span

17. On average, for how long have such exchanges, discussions and meetings been going on?

- ☐ Only for the duration of a particular project
- ☐ Independent of a project in particular, for less than one year
- ☐ Independent of a project in particular, for between one and two years
- ☐ Independent of a project in particular, for more than two years
- ☐ Not applicable

Learning communities promoting staff member learning

18. Would you say that you and other managers participating in such exchanges, discussions and meetings form a group or community, however informal?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ No response

19. If we were to expand the notion of communities of managers, to what extent would you agree with the following statement: "managers in the ICRC are part of an organisation-wide learning community"?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ No response

### Demographics

20. What is your gender?

☐ Female

☐ Male

21. What is your age?

☐ under 25

☐ 25 to 34

☐ 35 to 44

☐ 45 to 54

☐ 55 to 64

☐ 65 or older

22. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐ Secondary education (high school)

☐ Bachelor's degree or equivalent university diploma

☐ Master's degree or equivalent university diploma

☐ Doctorate or equivalent university diploma

You and the ICRC

23. What is your current contractual status in the ICRC?

☐ Delegation contract

☐ Geneva contract

☐ National Society contract

24. In what department are you currently working?

☐ I work in a support department (for instance Administration, Logistics, ICT, HR, Chancellery, etc.)

☐ I work in an operational department (for instance Protection, Assistance, Communication, Cooperation, etc.)

☐ I am the head/deputy head of a field structure (for instance delegation, sub-delegation, office, mission, etc.)

25. For how long have you been in a management function in the ICRC?

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ From 2 to 4 years

☐ From 5 to 9 years

☐ From 10 to 14 years

☐ 15 years and more

26. How many staff members do you supervise directly (both operational and functional, that is red line and blue line together)?

☐ 1 staff member

☐ 2 staff members

☐ From 2 to 5 staff members

☐ More than 5 staff members

☐ I currently do not supervise any staff members

Please feel free to comment

### Conclusion

Thank you very much for having taken the time to fill in this questionnaire!

Have a nice day,

Caspar



## **Appendix 3. Interview schedule**

1. Introduction, thanks for participating, assurance of confidentiality, agree on recording
2. Modes of learning
  - 2.1. According to the survey, learning by doing and coaching are contributing most to learning at work. How would you comment on this?
  - 2.2. According to the survey, e-learning contributes least to learning at work. How would you comment on this?
3. Learning communities
  - 3.1. According to the survey, locally-hired managers are more often part of the group feeling part of an organisation-wide learning community. How would you comment on this?
  - 3.2. According to the survey, managers who monitor the learning progress of their staff members are more often part of the group feeling part of an organisation-wide learning community. How would you comment on this?
  - 3.3. According to the survey, managers working on a particular project are more often part of the group feeling part of an organisation-wide learning community. How would you comment on this?
  - 3.4. How would you define a learning community of managers?
  - 3.5. Would you say learning communities in the ICRC have a particular culture?
  - 3.6. How do you understand change management and how is it discussed during exchanges, discussions and meetings?
  - 3.7. How is leadership addressed during exchanges, discussions and meetings?
  - 3.8. How is conflict addressed during exchanges, discussions and meetings?
  - 3.9. How can learning communities, or even an organisation-wide learning community of managers, be promoted?
4. Any other remarks?
5. Thank you

## Appendix 4. Survey results

Survey questionnaire results	
Variable	N (%)
<b>Demographics</b>	
<b>Gender , n=75</b>	
Female	26 (35)
Male	49 (65)
<b>Age, years, n=75</b>	
24-44	52 (69)
45-64	23 (31)
<b>Education, n=74</b>	
Secondary	5 (7)
Bachelor	24 (32)
Master	44 (60)
Post master	1 (1)
<b>Contract, n=75</b>	
GVA	49 (65)
National society	3 (4)
Local	23 (31)
<b>Department, n=75</b>	
Operational	29 (39)
Support	29 (39)
Head	17 (22)
<b>Time in management, years, n=74</b>	
<5	32 (43)
5-14	35 (47)
≥15	7 (10)
<b>Staff under supervision, n=75</b>	
<2	16 (21)
2-5	18 (24)
>5	41 (55)
<b>Staff member learning</b>	
<b>Modes of learning, contributing to workplace learning</b>	
<b>Face-to- face courses, n=84</b>	
Significantly	36 (43)
Somewhat	40 (48)
Minimally	8 (9)
<b>Learning by doing, n=84</b>	
Significantly	76 (91)
Somewhat	7 (8)
Minimally	1 (1)
<b>Learning atmosphere in the team, n=84</b>	
Significantly	51 (61)
Somewhat	29 (34)
Minimally	4 (5)

<b>Peer groups, n=82</b>	
Significantly	29 (36)
Somewhat	47 (57)
Minimally	6 (7)
<b>Workshop by the department, n=84</b>	
Significantly	38 (45)
Somewhat	43 (51)
Minimally	3 (4)
<b>Individual coaching, n=83</b>	
Significantly	64 (77)
Somewhat	15 (18)
Minimally	4 (5)
<b>E-learning, n=82</b>	
Significantly	10 (12)
Somewhat	50 (61)
Minimally	22 (27)
<b>Rank of modes of learning, contributing to workplace learning</b>	
<b>Face-to- face courses, n=83</b>	
1	7 (8)
2	16 (19)
3	10 (12)
4	18 (22)
5	16 (19)
6	14 (17)
7	2 (3)
<b>Learning by doing, n=83</b>	
1	44 (53)
2	24 (29)
3	6 (7)
4	3 (4)
5	2 (3)
6	2 (2)
7	2 (2)
<b>Learning atmosphere in the team, n=84</b>	
1	13 (16)
2	7 (8)
3	21 (25)
4	16 (19)
5	9 (11)
6	9 (11)
7	8 (10)

<b>Peer groups, n=83</b>	
1	3 (4)
2	2 (2)
3	11 (13)
4	12 (15)
5	19 (23)
6	21 (25)
7	15 (18)
<b>Workshop by the department, n=83</b>	
1	4 (5)
2	9 (11)
3	15 (18)
4	14 (17)
5	21 (25)
6	15 (18)
7	5 (6)
<b>Individual coaching, n=83</b>	
1	10 (12)
2	24 (29)
3	18 (22)
4	17 (20)
5	7 (8)
6	4 (5)
7	3 (4)
<b>E-learning, n=83</b>	
1	2 (2)
2	1 (1)
3	2 (2)
4	3 (4)
5	9 (11)
6	18 (22)
7	48 (58)
<b>Informal collaborative learning</b>	
<b>Where/how do the informal meetings/discussions take place?</b>	
<b>In person, n=82</b>	
Not apply	1 (1)
Sometimes apply	3 (4)
Apply	17 (21)
Most apply	61 (74)
<b>On line, n=82</b>	
Not apply	0
Sometimes apply	29 (35)
Apply	37 (45)
Most apply	16 (20)
<b>Teleconference, n=81</b>	
Not apply	18 (22)
Sometimes apply	32 (39)
Apply	28 (35)
Most apply	3 (4)

<b>E-mail, n=81</b>	
Not apply	3 (4)
Sometimes apply	9 (11)
Apply	34 (42)
Most apply	35 (43)
<b>Online forum, n=81</b>	
Not apply	45 (55)
Sometimes apply	30 (36)
Apply	4 (5)
Most apply	3 (4)
<b>Participants in informal meetings/discussions, n=77</b>	
Same department in different sites	29 (38)
Various departments in one site	23 (30)
Various departments in different sites	18 (23)
Same department in one site	7 (9)
<b>Participants from outside the ICRC in informal meetings/discussions, n=74</b>	
Never	49 (66)
Sometimes	20 (27)
Often	5 (7)
Always	0
<b>Topics discussed in informal meetings/discussions</b>	
Function specific, n=84	
Yes	61 (73)
No	23 (27)
Team management, n=84	
Yes	42 (50)
No	42 (50)
Staff learning, n=84	
Yes	30 (36)
No	54 (64)
<b>Shared values, directed to staff member learning in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>	
Yes	60 (85)
No	11 (15)
<b>Monitoring of the progress of staff member learning in informal meetings/discussions , n=67</b>	
Yes	43 (64)
No	24 (36)
<b>Engaging in learning together and individual further learning in meetings/discussions, n=69</b>	
Yes	42 (61)
No	27 (39)
<b>Discussion of new ideas in informal meetings/discussions, n=72</b>	
Yes	64 (89)
No	8 (11)

<b>Diversity of participants in informal meetings/discussions, n=73</b>	
Very diverse	15 (21)
Quite diverse	32 (44)
Quite similar	22 (30)
Very similar	4 (5)
<b>Challenge and support each other in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>	
Yes	60 (85)
No	11 (15)
<b>Distinct culture or practice in informal meetings/discussions, n=66</b>	
Yes	7 (11)
No	58 (88)
Other	1 (1)
<b>Change and change management discussed in informal meetings/discussions, n=63</b>	
Yes	47 (75)
No	16 (25)
<b>Leadership in informal meetings/discussions, n=71</b>	
No	12 (17)
One person	36 (51)
Several persons	23 (32)
<b>Duration over time of the informal meetings/discussions, n=62</b>	
Project duration	25 (40)
1-2 years	20 (32)
>2 years	17 (28)
<b>Learning communities</b>	
<b>Forming a community of managers in informal meetings/discussions, n=72</b>	
Yes	47 (65)
No	25 (35)
<b>Managers in the ICRC are part of organisation-wide learning community, n=73</b>	
Yes	51 (70)
No	22 (30)

## Appendix 5. Interview data matrix

Themes	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5	Interviewee 6
Locally-hired staff more interested in LC*	Surprised at the finding	Bigger numbers of local employees  Sharing more  Local staff more interconnected  Expatriates are expected to provide training/support, rather than receive	Local staff have more time  Local staff have more ambition to learn and to become expatriates	Local staff more interconnected  Shared understanding of the context (conflict)  Expatriates try to hide weaknesses	Shared understanding of the context  Local staff receive more monitoring and feedback	
Learning by doing	Contacting peers, instead of supervisor, and learn from their experience in the past	Most important mode of learning  You have theoretical training, but you cannot just do it	Most important mode of learning	Most important mode of learning  In the ICRC everything is dependent on the context	Most important mode of learning	Important mode of learning  Knowledge stays longer  "ICRC is unique. Cannot take knowledge from school and just apply it."  Reading manuals is not enough
Coaching	One to one coaching more efficient	Identify a specific issue to build on  Gives empowerment  Feel more support	Identify a specific issue/task to work on	Not worried of making mistakes and learn from mistakes  Willing to share  Pass humanitarian values	Risk to learn wrong routines	Important mode of learning  Doesn't have to be from direct supervisor  Monitoring and feedback is very important

E-learning	<p>Requires strong motivation</p> <p>Start courses, not finish</p> <p>Not enough interaction with people</p> <p>Perhaps, short e-learning, followed by coaching</p>	<p>Not enough practical learning</p> <p>Can motivate you to do/learn more</p> <p>It is becoming more interactive</p> <p>Depends on individual learning style</p>	Requires time	<p>Not enough practical learning</p> <p>Richness and perspective of practical learning is lost</p>	<p>Not very effective</p> <p>Specific role plays/cases can be useful</p>	<p>Not enough interactive</p> <p>Demotivating</p>
Project work	<p>Beginning and ending</p> <p>Specific objective</p> <p>Smaller team</p> <p>More creative</p> <p>More freedom</p> <p>Better learning atmosphere</p>	<p>Learn constantly through sharing with others</p> <p>See completed project</p>	<p>See completed project</p> <p>Learn in a specific time-frame</p> <p>Learn constantly through sharing with others</p>	Keeps you focused	<p>Work in diverse teams</p> <p>Learn more</p>	
Organisational culture	<p>Supportive in small communities</p> <p>Sharing among colleagues from the same department in different locations</p> <p>Creates nice environment among people who are looking for solutions</p>	Culture of a top-down approach	Small communities – support, willingness to share and learn	<p>An integral part of the organisation</p> <p>Openness</p>	<p>Specific vocabulary</p> <p>There is no specific culture, but common understanding of things in the ICRC</p> <p>Very reactive according to the humanitarian context</p> <p>Working in conflict areas contributes to team building</p> <p>If no conflict – need more creativity</p>	<p>In the ICRC you survive if you hold with the group</p> <p>Natural interaction on daily basis with reflection on human relationships</p> <p>You can be “in” or “out”, because you don’t know the culture</p>
Hierarchy	<p>Staff members have to be more included in change management decisions</p> <p>Set down rules</p>	Culture of a top-down approach	Conflict is rarely a problem in the ICRC	Debate	<p>Hierarchy is the problem and the problem solver</p> <p>Include people in decision making, in order to prepare for change</p>	<p>In the ICRC you survive if you hold with the group</p> <p>Conflict often not addressed</p>



Change management	<p>Changes are happening</p> <p>Needs more discussion</p> <p>Expatriate and local staff feel nervous, uncertain about it</p> <p>Staff members have to be more included in change management decisions</p>	<p>Managing changes</p> <p>Make sure people feel comfortable in a changing environment</p> <p>Changes are happening at the moment in the ICRC, but staff members do not feel comfortable</p>	<p>Part of the discussion – a process of achieving what you want to achieve</p>	<p>Make people understand the change</p> <p>Should be part of the discussion, not yet completely</p>	<p>Needs to be more effective</p> <p>Include people in decision making, in order to prepare for change</p>	
Leadership/facilitation of LC	<p>Facilitation of LC should be passed around</p> <p>A natural leader comes around, if you leave a group to itself</p>	<p>There is always a leader in a group</p> <p>Leaders should keep the direction</p> <p>Members feel listened to, valued</p> <p>1-3 people, working in synchrony</p>			<p>Moderator, remind objectives</p> <p>Need some guidance</p> <p>Keep to institutional principles</p>	<p>Someone who is helping the group</p> <p>Outstanding</p>
Conflict	<p>Set down rules</p>	<p>Negotiation and compromise</p> <p>Not many people in the ICRC want to “rock the boat”</p>	<p>Agree to disagree</p> <p>Conflict is rarely a problem in the ICRC</p>	<p>Debate</p> <p>See different perspectives</p> <p>Value individual opinion</p> <p>Take a decision as a group</p>	<p>Through hierarchy</p> <p>Hierarchy is the problem and the problem solver</p> <p>Because of fear, people do not often fight for their ideas</p> <p>Rarely a big conflict in the ICRC</p>	<p>Often not addressed</p>
ICT, online forum	<p>ICT can help LC, has to be well managed</p>	<p>Use everything technology affords to support communication</p>	<p>ICT can help LC, has to be well managed</p> <p>support from top management (President, Director General)</p>		<p>Very useful, when changing locations of work</p> <p>“How many people will be using it?”</p>	<p>LC can be supported by an online forum</p>

Diversity	Some groups have the same people over and over again  Diversity is important, not yet there in the ICRC			Group of people from various background in LC	Group of people from various background	
Humanitarian values				“I am worried that in our pursuit of professionalism we will lose our souls, getting a bit disconnected”  Passing humanitarian values to the next generation of humanitarians	Very reactive according to the humanitarian context  Working in conflict areas contributes to team building  If no conflict – need more creativity	
Positive culture in small LC	Limited number of participants  Supportive in small communities		Small communities – support, willingness to share and learn			Smaller groups, supportive culture
LC	Limited number of participants, balanced groups  Exchange ideas and experience to reach a goal  Staff members can express better their ideas in times of change  Some groups have the same people over and over again  Diversity is important, not yet there in the ICRC	Discuss challenges in a safe environment  Give feedback  Encourage cultivation of LC, outside normal working team  Needs time  Know what the organisation is doing as a whole	Learning for oneself and learning for the team  New ideas and methods are introduced and tested  Realised necessity to learn constantly	Group of people from various backgrounds  Learning together  Common vision	Could be more active  People from different backgrounds, who share experience  Can support people go through change	“It is the first time I hear the term LC. I realize, it is all around us...Without a learning community, I could not do my job.”  Learning by working together and collaboration.

Organisation-wide LC	<p>Possible interrelated small groups</p> <p>Role of technology to link groups, in addition to occasional face to face meetings</p> <p>Video conferencing</p> <p>Internal "Facebook", but well-managed</p> <p>Staff members can express better their ideas in times of change</p> <p>Some staff members think that an e-mail might hurt your career</p>	<p>Encourage cultivation of LC</p> <p>A question of trust</p> <p>Can start from integration course, when new staff join the organisation</p> <p>Use everything what technology affords to support communication</p>	<p>Need to be managed</p> <p>Leader with a vision, President or Director General of the organisation</p> <p>Use technology to connect people in more formal way</p>	<p>Time constrains</p> <p>"I am worried that in our pursuit of professionalism we will lose our souls, getting a bit disconnected".</p>	<p>Not feeling part of organisation-wide LC</p> <p>But ICRC is a LC, because of doing jobs relevant to the organisation only</p> <p>Online forum with resources to learn and share experience</p> <p>Online forum especially important when you change locations all the time</p> <p>Difficult start</p> <p>"How many people will be using it?"</p>	<p>Forum on-line</p> <p>Smaller groups</p>
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\*LC, learning community